

THE LADY OF THE
BASEMENT FLAT

THE LADY OF THE BASEMENT FLAT

By

Mrs. GEORGE DE HORNE VAIZEY

*Author of 'About Peggy Saville,' 'Betty Trevor,' 'Big Game,'
'Pixie O'Shaughnessy,' 'The Independence of Claire,'
etc., etc., etc.*

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY ELIZABETH EARNSHAW

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HE ASKED THE QUESTION SO DEEPLY AND SERIOUSLY THAT
IT BROUGHT TEARS TO MY EYES.



IT WAS MR. MAPLESTONE'S VOICE. I LOOKED UP AND SAW HIM STANDING BY MY SIDE.

The Lady of the Basement Flat

CHAPTER I WHY NOT?

AT three o'clock this afternoon Evelyn Wastneys died. I am Evelyn Wastneys, and I died, standing at the door of an old country home in Ireland, with my hands full of ridiculous little silver shoes and horseshoes, and a Paris hat on my head, and a trembling treble voice whispering in my ear:—

“Good-bye, Evelyn darling—darling! Thank you—thank you for all you have been to me! Oh, Evelyn, *promise* you will not be unhappy!”

Then some mysterious hidden muscle, whose existence I had never before suspected, pulled two little strings at the corners of my mouth, and my lips smiled—a marionette smile—and a marionette voice cried jauntily:—

“Unhappy? Never! Why, I am free! I am going to begin to live.”

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Then I watched a tall bridegroom in tweeds tenderly help a little bride in mole-coloured taffeta and sable furs into the waiting car, the horn blew, the engines whirled, a big hand and a little one flourished handkerchiefs out of the window, a white satin shoe danced ridiculously after the wheels, and Aunt Emmeline cried sensibly :—

“That’s over, thank goodness! The wind is sharp! Let’s have tea!”

She hurried into the house to give orders, and the old Evelyn Wastneys stood staring after the car, as it sped down the drive, passed through the lodge gates, and spun out into the high road. She had the strangest, most curious feeling that it was only the ghost of herself who stood there—a ghost in a Paris hat and gown, with long suède gloves wrinkled up her arms, and a pendant of mingled initials sparkling on her lace vest. The real, true Evelyn—a little, naked, shivering creature—was skurrying after that car, bleating piteously to be taken in.

But the car rolled on quicker and quicker, its occupants too much taken up with themselves to have time to waste on dull other people. In another minute it was out of sight, but the ghost did not come back. The new Evelyn lingered upon the steps, waiting for it to return. There was such a blank, empty ache in the place where her heart used to be. It seemed impossible that that skurry-

ing little ghost would not come back, nestle again in its own place, and warm up the empty void. But it never came back. The new Evelyn turned and walked into the house.

“Well, it has all gone off very well! Kathleen looked quite nice, though I always do say that a real lace veil is less becoming than tulle. There was a rose and thistle pattern right across her nose, and personally I think those sheaves of lilies are too large. I hope she’ll be happy, I am sure! Mr. Anderson seems a nice man; but one never knows. It’s always a risk going abroad. A young Canadian proposed to me as a girl. I said to him, ‘Do you think you could be nice enough to make up to me for home, and country, and relations and friends, and associations and customs, and everything I have valued all my life?’ He said it was a matter of opinion. What did *I* think? I said it was ridiculous nonsense. *No* man was nice enough! So he married Rosa Bates, and I hear their second boy is a hunchback. You are eating nothing, my dear. Take a scone. Let’s hope it’s all for the best!”

“Best or worst, it’s done now,” I said gloomily. Basil Anderson was certainly “nice,” and, unlike Aunt Emmeline, my sister Kathleen entertained no doubt that he could fill every gap—home, country, friends, a selection of elderly aunts, and even that only sister who had so far acted as buffer between

herself and the storms of life. At this very moment the mole-coloured toque was probably reclining comfortably on the tweed shoulder, and a smile was replacing tears as a big booming voice cried comfortably :—

“ Evelyn! Oh, *she'll* be all right! Don't worry about Evelyn, honey. Think of *me* ! ”

Following the line of the least resistance, I took the scone and chewed it vacantly. Figuratively speaking, it tasted of dust and ashes; literally, it tasted of nothing at all, and the tea was just a hot fluid which had to be swallowed at intervals, as medicine is swallowed of necessity.

Aunt Emmeline helped herself systematically from each of the plates in turn, working steadily through courses of bread and butter, sandwiches, scone, *petits fours*, and wedding cake. She was a scraggy woman, with the appetite of a giant. Kathie and I used to wonder where the food went! Probably to her tongue!

“ Of course,” said Aunt Emmeline, continuing her thoughts aloud, as was her disconcerting habit, “ Kathleen has money, and that gives a wife a whip hand. I begged her only yesterday to stand up for herself. Those little fair women are so apt to be bullied. I knew a case. Well, mind, we'll hope it mayn't come to *that*! If she is sensible and doesn't expect too much, things may work out all right. Especially for the first years. If anything *does* go

wrong, it will be your fault, Evelyn, for spoiling her as you have done."

"Thanks very much for the cheering thought," I said snappily. Aunt Emmeline helped herself to a sandwich, and blinked with exasperating forbearance.

"Not cheerful, perhaps, but it may be *useful*! If you'd taken my advice. It's never too late to mend, Evelyn."

"Even at twenty-six?"

Aunt Emmeline surveyed me critically. She was taking stock, and considering just how young, how old, how fresh, how damaged those lengthy years had left my physical charms. I looked in a long glass opposite, and took stock at the same time. A smart young woman—oh, very smart indeed, for as Kathie had argued, if you can't "blow" expense for your only sister's wedding, when on earth are you going to do it? Light brown hair, "still untouched by grey," hazel eyes with very long, very finely marked eyebrows (secretly they are the joy of my life!), good features, and a sulky expression. The old Evelyn used to be very good-looking—(she's dead now, so I can say so, as much as I like)—this new one is good-looking too, in a disagreeable, unattractive kind of way. If you saw her dining at the next table in an hotel you would say, "Rather a fine-looking girl!" And the man with you would reply, "Think so! Too much of a temper for my

fancy. Glad she don't belong to me." I realised as much as I looked in the glass, and that made me crosser than ever. If I had been alone, able to cry, or storm, or grizzle, or go to bed just as I liked, I could have borne it better; but fancy losing your home, and your occupation, and the only person in all the world you really loved, all in one day, and coming straight from the wreck to have tea with Aunt Emmeline!

The sandwich was finished before the inspection. A piece of scone followed.

"Of course," said Aunt Emmeline, "you are *not* in your first bloom. *That* we can't expect. Your colour is a little harder and more fixed" (the figure in the glass gave a spasmodic jerk. The sulky expression was pierced by a gleam of fear. "*Fixed!*" Good gracious! She might be talking of those old people who have little red lines over their cheek bones in the place of "bloom". It's *ridiculous* to say I am "fixed". It is a matter of indifference to me how I look, but I do insist on truth!) "and your air of pride and independence is unbecoming in an unmarried girl. Men like to see a girl sweet, clinging, pliant."

"What men?"

"*All* men!"

"Oh! And in my case, for instance, to whom would you suggest I should proceed to cling?"

"That," said Aunt Emmeline briskly, "is pre-

cisely what I wish to discuss." She lifted the last morsel of scone from the plate, stared at it, and popped it into her mouth. "My dear, has it ever occurred to you to think what you are going to *do*?"

"Aunt Emmeline, for the last months it has rarely occurred to me to think of anything else!"

"Very well then, that's all to the good. As I said to Aunt Eliza, let us leave her alone till Kathleen has gone. Evelyn is obstinate, and if you interfere she will only grow more pig-headed. Let her find things out for herself. Experience, Eliza, will do more than either you or I. Sooner or later, even Evelyn must realise that you can't run a house, and garden, and stable, in the same way on half the ordinary income. Now that Kathleen is married, she naturally takes with her her own fortune."

She looked at me expectantly, and I smiled, another stiff, marionette smile—and said:—

"How true! Curiously enough, that fact has already penetrated to my dull brain!"

"Now I do hope and pray, Evelyn, that you are not going to argue with me," cried Aunt Emmeline, with a sudden access of energy which was positively startling. "It's ridiculous saying that because there is only one mistress instead of two, expense will therefore be halved. I have kept house for thirty-three years, and have never once allowed an order at the door, so I may be supposed to know. Nonsense! The rent is the same, I suppose, and the

rates, and the taxes. You must sit down to a decent meal even if you are alone, and it takes the same fire to cook four potatoes as eight. Your garden must be kept going, and if you do away with one horse, you still require a groom, I suppose, to look after the rest. Don't talk to me of economising; you'd be up to your neck in debt before a year was over—if you weren't in a lunatic asylum with nervous depression, living alone in that hole-in-a-corner old house, with not a soul but servants to speak to from morning till night. You have a nervous temperament, Evelyn. You may not realise it, but I remember as a child how you used to fidget and dash about. Dear Kathie sat still and sucked her thumb. I said at the time, 'Evelyn is better-looking, but mark my words, Kathie will be married first!' And you see! It's because I love you, my dear, and you are my dear sister's child that I warn you to beware of living alone in that house!"

"Thank you so much," I said nastily. (When people presage a remark by saying that they only say it because they love you, you may lay long odds that it's going to be disagreeable!) "It certainly sounds a gruesome prospect. Not even a choice between bankruptcy and mania, but a certainty of *both*! And within a year, too! Such a short run for one's money! Aunt Eliza had some suggestion to make, then? And you evidently approved. Would you mind telling me exactly what it was?"

“That is what I am trying to do, but you *will* interrupt. Naturally, your home is with us, your mother’s sisters. You shall have the blue room over the porch. If you wish it, we are willing that you should bring your own pictures. The silver and valuables you can send to the bank, and the furniture can be sold. You shall pay us five guineas a week, and we will keep your horse, and house old Bridget if you don’t want to part from her. She can attend to your room, and sleep in the third attic. There would be no extras except washing, and a fire in your room. You know how we live; every comfort, but no excess. I disapprove of excess. Eliza and I have often regretted that you and Kathie have such extravagant ways. Early tea, as if you were old women, and bare shoulders for dinner. You may laugh, my dear, but it’s no laughing matter. One thing leads to another. You can’t wear an evening dress and sit down to a chop. Soup and fish and an *entrée* before you know where you are. We have high tea. You would save money on evening gowns alone. A dressy blouse is all that is required.”

Aunt Emmeline paused to draw breath, twitched, jerked, and resolutely braced herself to say a difficult thing.

“And—and we shall welcome you, my dear! We shall be p—pleased to have you!”

Through all her protestation of welcome, through

all her effort at warmth, the plain, unflattering truth forced its way out. To entertain a young independent niece beneath their roof might seem to the two aunts a duty, but, most certainly, most obviously, it would *not* be a pleasure! I was quite convinced that for myself it would be a fiery trial to accept the offer; but it was a shock to realise that the aunts felt the same!

I reviewed the situation from the two points of view, the while Aunt Emmeline feverishly hacked at the hard sugar coating of *the* cake. For a young, comparatively young woman, to go from the liberty of her own home to share the stuffy, conventional, dull, proper, do-nothing-but-fuss-and-talk-for-ever-about-nothing life of two old ladies in a country town would obviously be a change for the worse; but for the aforesaid old ladies to have their trivial life enriched by the advent of a young, attractive, and (when she is in a good temper!) lively and amusing niece, this should surely be a joy and a gain! But it *wasn't* a joy. The poor old dears were shuddering at the thought that their peaceful routine might be spoiled. They didn't *want* "a bright young influence!" They wanted to be free to do as they liked—sup luxuriously on cocoa and an egg, turn up black cashmere skirts over wadded petticoats, and doze before the fire, discuss the servants' failings by the hour, drink glasses of hot water, and go to bed at ten o'clock. . . . As she

hacked at the sugar crust, the corners of Aunt Emmeline's lips turned more and more downward. My silence had been taken for consent, and in the recesses of her heart she was saying to herself, "Farewell! a long farewell to all our frowstings!" I felt sorry for the poor old soul, and hastened to put her out of her misery.

"It's very good of you, Aunt Emmeline. And Aunt Eliza. Thank you *very* much, but I have quite decided to have a home of my own, even though I can't afford to keep on The Clough. I am going to live in London."

Just for one second, uncontrollable relief and joy gleamed from the watching eyes, then the mask fell, and she valiantly tried to look distressed.

"Ah, Evelyn! Obstinate again! Setting yourself up to know better than your elders. There'll be a bitter awakening for you some day, my dear, and when it comes you will be glad enough of your old aunties' help. Well! the door will never be closed against you. However hard and ungrateful you may be, we shall remember our duty to our sister's child. Whenever you choose to return——"

"I shall see the candle burning in the casement window!"

She looked so pained, so shocked, that if I had had any heart left I should have put my arms round her neck, and begged her pardon with a kiss; but I had no heart, only something cold, and hard,

and tight, which made it impossible to be loving or kind, so I said hastily :—

“I shall certainly want to pay you a visit some day. It is very kind of you to promise to have me. After living in London, Ferbay will seem quite a haven of rest.”

Aunt Emmeline accepted the olive branch with a sniff.

“But why London?” she inquired.

“Why not?” I replied. It was the only answer it seemed possible to make!

CHAPTER II

AUNT ELIZA SPEAKS

IT is two days after the wedding. Kathie has been Mrs. Basil Anderson for forty-eight hours, and no doubt looks back upon her spinster existence as a vague, unsatisfactory dream. She is reclining on a deck-chair on board the great ship which is bearing her to her new home, and her devoted husband is hovering by her side. I can just imagine how she looks, in her white blanket coat, and the blue hood—*just* the right shade to go with her eyes—an artful little curl, which has taken her quite three minutes to arrange, falling over one temple, and her spandy little shoes stretched out at full length. I know those shoes! By special request I rubbed the soles on the gravel paths, so that they might not look *too* newly married. Quite certainly Kathie will be throwing an occasional thought to the girl she left behind her, a “poor old Evelyn!” with a dim, pitiful little ache at the thought of my barren lot. Quite certainly, too, for one moment when she remembers, there will be twenty when she forgets. Quite right, of course!

Quite natural, and wife-like, and just as it should be, and only a selfish, ungenerous wretch could wish it to be otherwise. All the same——

I wrenched myself out of the aunts' clutches yesterday morning on the plea of going home to tidy up. Though the wedding took place from their house, all the preparatory muddle happened here, and it will take days and days to go through Kathie's rooms alone, and decide what to keep, what to give away, and what to burn outright.

The drawers were littered with pretty rubbish—oddments of ribbon, old gloves, crumpled flowers, and the like. It goes against the principles of any right-minded female to give away tawdry fineries, and yet—and yet—— *Could* I bear to destroy them? To see those little white gloves shrivel up in the flames, the high-heeled little slippers crumple and split? It would seem like making a bonfire of Kathie herself.

I tidied, and arranged, and packed into fresh parcels, working at fever heat with my hands, while all the time the voice in my brain kept repeating, "Now, Evelyn, what are you going to do? What are you going to do, my dear, with your blank new life?"

To leave the old home and start afresh—that is as far as I have got so far—but I must make up my mind, and quickly too, for this house is too full of memories to be a healthy shelter. Kathie and I

have lived here ever since we left school, first with father, then after his death with an old governess-companion. Since her marriage a year ago we have been alone, luxuriating in our freedom, and soothing the protestations of aunts by constant promises to look out for a successor. Then Kathie met Basil Anderson, and no one was cruel enough to grudge us our last months together.

Now I am alone, with no one in the world to consider beside myself, with my own home to make, my own work to find, my own happiness to discover. Does it make it better or worse, I wonder, that I am rich, and the question of money does not enter in? Ninety-nine people out of a hundred would answer at once that it is better, but I'm not so sure. If I had a tiny income, just enough to ensure me from absolute want, hard regular work would be necessary, and might be good for body and brain. I *want* work! I must have it if I am to keep going, but the mischief is, I have never been taught to be useful, and I have no idea what I could do! I can drive a car. I can ride anything that goes on four legs. I can dance, and skate, and arrange flowers with taste. I can re-trim a hat, and at a pinch make a whole blouse. I can order a nice meal, and grumble when it is spoiled. I can strum on the piano and paint Christmas cards. I can entertain a house-party of big-wigs.

I have also (it seems a queer thing to say!) a

kind of genius for simply—being kind! The poor people in the village call me “the kind one,” to distinguish me from Kathie, who, poor lamb! never did an unkind thing in her life. But she didn’t always *understand*, that was the difference. When they did wrong she was shocked and estranged, while I felt dreadfully, dreadfully sorry, and more anxious than ever to help them again. Kathie used to think me too mild, but I don’t know! The consequences of sin are so terrible in themselves, that I always long to throw in a lot of help with the blame. The people about here seem to know this by instinct, for they come to me in their troubles and anxieties and—*shames*, poor souls! and open their hearts as they do to nobody else. “Sure then, most people are kind in patches,” an old woman said to me one day; “’tis yourself that is kind *all round*!”

I don’t know that it’s much credit to do what is no effort, and certainly if I could choose a rôle in life it would be to play the part of a good fairy, comforting people, cheering them up, helping them over stiles, springing delightful little surprises upon them, just where the road looked blocked! The trouble is that I’ve no gift for organised charity. I have a pretty middling strong will of my own (“pig-headedness” Aunt Emmeline calls it!), and committees drive me daft. They may be useful things in their way, but it’s not *my* way. I want to get to

work on my own, and not to sit talk, talk, talking over every miserable, piffling little detail. No! If I play fairy, I must at least be free to wave my own wand, and to find my own niche where I can wave it to the best advantage. The great, all-absorbing question is—*where* and *how* to begin?

Advertisements are the orthodox refuge of the perplexed. Suppose, for the moment, that I advertised, stating my needs and qualifications in the ordinary shilling-a-line fashion. It would run something like this:—

“Lady. Young. Healthy. Good appearance. Seeks occupation for a loving heart. Town or country. Travel if required.”

It sounds like an extract from a matrimonial paper. I wonder how many, or, to speak more accurately, how *few* bachelors would exhibit any anxiety to occupy the vacancy. I might add “private means,” and *then* the answers would arrive in sacks, I should have the offer of a hundred husbands, and a dozen kind homes, with hot and cold water, cheerful society, a post office within a mile, and a golf course in the neighbourhood. A hundred mothers of families would welcome me to their bosoms, and a hundred spinsters would propose the grand tour and intellectual companionship; but I want to be loved for myself, and in return to love, and to help——

I am not thinking of marriage. Some day I shall

probably fall in love, like everyone else, and be prepared to go off to the Ural Mountains or Kamtschatka, or any other remote spot, for the privilege of accompanying my Jock. I shall probably be just as mad, and deluded, and happy, and ridiculous as any other girl, when my turn comes ; but it hasn't come *yet*, and I'm not going to sit still and twiddle my thumbs pending its approach. I'm in no hurry ! It is in my mind that I should prefer a few preliminary independent years.

Aunt Eliza drove over this afternoon to "cheer me up". She means well, but her cheering capacities are not great. Her mode of attack is first to enlarge on every possible ill, and reduce one to a state of collapse from pure self-pity, and then to proceed to waft the same troubles aside with a casual flick of the hand. She sat down beside me, stroked my hand (I hate being pawed !), and set plaintively to work.

"*Poor dear !* I know you are feeling desolate. It's so hard for you, isn't it, dear, having no other brother or sister ? Makes it all the harder, doesn't it, dear ! And Kathie *leant* on you so ! You must feel that your work is gone. Stranded ! That's the feeling, isn't it ? I *do* understand. But"—(sudden change to major key)—"*she* is happy ! You must forget yourself in her joy !"

I said, "Oh ! yes," and removed my hand under

pretence of feeling for a handkerchief. Her face lengthened again, and she drew a deep sigh.

(Minor.) "I always feel it is the last straw for a woman when she has to give up her home in a time of trouble. A home is a refuge, and you have made The Clough so charming. It will be a wrench to move all the dear old furniture, and to leave the garden where you and Kathie were so happy together. Wherever you look, poor dear, you must feel a fresh stab. Associations!—so precious, aren't they, to a woman's heart? (Major.) But material things are of *small* value, after all, dear. We learn that as we grow *old*! A true woman can make a home wherever she goes——"

"I—I suppose she can."

(Minor.) "But of course the loneliness *is* a handicap. Having no one who needs you, no one to welcome you home. So sad! Especially in the evenings! Solitary people are apt to grow morose. You will miss Kathie's bright happy ways. (Quick change!) Well! Well! No one *need* be lonely in this world. There are thousands of suffering souls fainting by the wayside for lack of the very help which it is in your power to give. If I could just tell you of some cases I know!"

I pricked up my ears.

"I wish you would. I like to hear about other people's troubles!"

"My dear! Such a startling way of putting

things! You don't mean it. I know your tender heart! Of course the worst cases are in the big cities. London, now! Every time I go to London, and travel as one is obliged to do from one end of the city to the other, I look out upon those endless rows and rows of streets of small houses, and at the great towering blocks of flats at every turn, and feel *appalled* at the thought of the misery that goes on inside!"

"And the joy!"

"My dear, what kind of joy *can* there be in such places?"

"Not your kind perhaps, nor mine, but real enough all the same. People love one another, and have their own pleasures and interests. Little clerks come home to little wives and tell of little successes. Women in ugly houses buy some new piece of ugliness, and find it beautiful, and rejoice. Babies toddle about—fat, pretty things, with curly mops."

She stared at me blankly.

"Curly mops! What does it matter whether their hair curls or not? Ah, my dear, in such circumstances children are not all joy. I had a letter from a friend the other day—Lady Templar. We were at school together. Her nephew, Wenham Thorold, has lost his wife. Married at twenty-three. So silly! A clergyman's daughter, without a sou. Now, of course, she dies, and leaves him with five small children."

“Very inconsiderate!”

“Very inconvenient for the poor man! Only thirty-five, and a baby in arms. How will it help him if its hair curls? He puts the elder children to bed himself after his day’s work. Quite pathetic to hear of! Wouldn’t he have been happier with one?”

“Possibly—for the present. Later on the five will help *him*, and he will be glad and proud.”

“Children dragged up by strangers are not always a credit and pride. I hope these may be, but—— If you’d heard my friend’s tales! They live in a flat. Quite a cheap block in some unfashionable neighbourhood. *No* society. He has one small maid and a housekeeper to look after the children. Most inefficient, Adela says. Holes in their stockings, and shrieks the moment their father is out of the building!”

“What was he like?”

“He? Who? Oh, the poor father! Handsome, she said, but haggard. The Templar nose. Poor, helpless man!”

A horrible feeling surged over me. I felt it rise, swell, crash over my head like a flood of water—a conviction that I was listening to no tale, but to a *call*—that Providence had heard my cry for work, and had answered it in the person of Wenham Thorold—handsome and haggard—in the person of little Thorold girls with holes in their stockings, of

little Thorold boys who shrieked, and a Thorold baby with problematic hair that might, or might *not*, curl.

I cowered at the prospect. All very well to talk of my own way, and my own niche, all very well to dream of fairy wands, and of the soothing, self-ingratiating rôle of transforming other people's grey into gold, while the said people sat agape, transfixed with gratitude and admiration, *but*—how extraordinarily prosaic and unromantic the process became when worked out in sober black and white. To mend stockings, to stifle shrieks, to be snubbed by a cross housekeeper; probably, in addition, to be sent to Coventry by the handsome and haggard one, under suspicion of manœuvring for his affections. Yes, at the slightest interference he would certainly put me down as a designing female, with designs on his hand. At this last thought I sniggered, and Aunt Eliza looked severe.

“*No* subject for mirth, Evelyn. I'm surprised! *You* who are always talking of wanting to help —”

“But could I help him? I will, if I can. I have money and time, and am longing for work. Could I banish the housekeeper, and introduce a variation by paying to take her place?”

Aunt Eliza looked at the ceiling, and informed it obviously, though dumbly, that when nieces talked nonsense it was waste of breath to reply. Outraged

dignity spoke in her rigid back, in the thin contour of her cheek.

“A Wastneys to speak of being a housekeeper!”

I realised that I had gone too far, for to jest at the expense of the family pride was an unpardonable offence, so I added hastily :—

“Or I might take a flat hard by, and do good by stealth! Win the housekeeper’s heart, and then take charge of the five when she gads forth. Some of the other tenants might need help too. In those great big buildings, where scores of families live under one roof, there must always be *somebody* who needs a helping hand. It would be rather a charming rôle to play good fairy to the mansions!”

Even as I spoke a flash of inspiration seemed to light up my dark brain. My own careless words had created a picture which charmed, which intrigued. It was as though a veil had lifted, and I caught sight of beckoning hands. I saw before me a great, grim building, storey after storey rising in unbroken line, the dusty windows staring into the windows of a twin building across the road, just as tall, just as unlovely, just as desolate. I saw a bare entrance hall, in which pale-faced men and women came and went. I passed with them into so-called “homes” where electric light burned day and night, and little children played in nurseries about the size of a comfortable bed. Everybody, as it seemed, was worn down with the burden of the inevitable

daily task, so that there was no energy left for beauty, for gaiety, for joy. Suppose—oh, suppose there lived in that building one tenant whose mission it was to supply that need, to be a Happiness-Monger, a Fairy Godmother, a—a—a living bran pie of unexpected and stimulating *helps*.

For the first moment since that motor car turned out of the gate, bearing away the bride and bridegroom, a glow of warmth took the place of the blank ache in the place where my heart used to be. It hurt a little, just as it hurts when the circulation returns to frozen limbs, but it was a wholesome hurt, a hundred times better than the calm that had gone before. There glowed through my veins the exultation of the martyr. Now farewell to ease and luxury, to personal desires and ambitions. Henceforth I lived only to serve the race!

“Oh, Auntie, it’s a glorious idea. Why didn’t I think of it before? My vocation is ready and waiting for me, but I should never have found it if it hadn’t been for you! Why shouldn’t I take a little flat in some unfashionable block, and play good fairy to my neighbours? A free, unmarried woman is so useful! There ought to be one in every family, a permanent “Aunt Mary,” to lend a hand in its joys and sorrows, its spring cleanings, and its—jams! Nowadays Aunt Marys are so scarce. They are absorbed in their own schemes. Why shouldn’t I take up the rôle, and be a universal fairy to the

mansions—devoting my idle time to other people who need me, ready to love and to scold, to bake and to brew, to put my fingers in other people's pies, leaving behind sugar for them, and pulling out plums for myself of soothing, and comfort, and joy!" My voice broke suddenly. I was awfully lonely, and the thought of those figurative plums cut to the heart. The tears trickled down my cheeks; I forgot where I was, and to whom I was speaking, and just sobbed out all that was in my heart.

"Oh! Oh! To be needed again! To have some one to care for! That would help—that would fill the gap—that would make life worth while."

Instinctively I stretched out my hands, in appeal for sympathy and understanding.

"Oh, don't be silly!" said Aunt Eliza.

CHAPTER III

CHARMION FANE INTERVENES

DURING the next days the idea of making my home in London, and playing fairy god-mother to the tenants in a block of flats, took an ever-deepening root in my heart. I pondered on it incessantly and worked out plans as to ways and means.

Bridget should go with me as general factotum, for my method of living must be as simple as possible, since the neighbours would be more likely to confide their troubles to the ear of one who was, apparently, in the same position of life as themselves. Smart clothing would be unnecessary also, and a hundred and one luxuries of a leisured life. I mentally drew up a list of things taboo, and regarded it with—let me be honest—lingering regret. I was quite, quite willing to deny myself, but it is folly to pretend that it didn't cost a pang. I *like* good clothes and dainty meals, and motor-cars, and space, and luxury, and people to wait upon me when I'm tired, and unlimited supplies of flowers, and fruit, and hot water, to say nothing of my own

little share of variety and fun. Down at the bottom of my heart, a lurking doubt of myself stirred into life, and spoke with insistent voice:—

“All very well, Evelyn, but can you *keep it up*? Are you brave enough, strong enough, unselfish enough to give up all that has hitherto made your life, and to be satisfied with living through others? Won't the time come when nature will rebel, and demand a turn for yourself? And *then*, Evelyn, *then* what are you going to do? Could you ever respect yourself again if, having put your shoulder to the wheel, you drew back and lapsed into selfish indifference?”

As for Aunt Emmeline, she turned on the cold tap, and kept it on at a continuous trickle.

“Exaggerated nonsense! You always *were* exaggerated, Evelyn, from a child. Be kind, of course; that's only your duty, but I call it officious and presumptuous to interfere in other people's lives. *You* of all people! At your age! With your looks——”

“What have my looks to do with it?”

“My dear, it is not your fault, but I've said it before, and I say it again—you are *showy*! There is something about you which makes people stare. Dear Kathie could pass along quietly, or sit in a corner of a room and be conveniently overlooked, but you—I am not paying you a compliment, my dear, I consider it is a misfortune!—you *take the*

eye! Wherever you go, people will notice you and gossip about your movements. At twenty-six, and with your appearance, I ask you candidly, as aunt to niece—*do* you consider yourself a suitable person to live alone, and minister to widowers?"

"Well, if you put it like that, I *don't!* But what of the children who shriek, and have holes in their stockings? Mightn't they like me better just because I *am* young and look nice?"

I laughed as I spoke, but Aunt Emmeline was so pleased that I showed some glimmerings of reason, that she said suavely:—

"Wait ten years, dear! Till your hair is grey! You will age early with those sharp features. In ten or twelve years you can do as you please."

I thought, but did not say:—

"My dear aunt, but I shall do it *now!*"

A week passed by, while I pondered and worried, and then at last came a "lead" from without. A morning dawned when Bridget brought my letters with my early tea, and set them down on the table by my bed.

"Four letters this morning, and only one of the lot you'll be caring to see."

Bridget takes a deep interest in my correspondence, and always introduces a letter with a note of warning or congratulation: "That bothering creature is worrying at you again!" "There's a

laugh you'll be having over Master George's fun!" "You paid that bill before. Don't be letting them come over you with their tricks!"

It is, of course, reprehensible behaviour on the part of a maid, presumptuous, familiar, interfering; but Bridget is Bridget, and I might as soon command her not to use her tongue, as to stop taking an interest in anything that concerns "Herself". As a matter of fact, I don't try. Servility, and decorum, and a machine-like respect are to be hired for cash at any registry office; but Bridget's red-hot devotion, her child-like, unshakable conviction that everything that Miss Evelyn does and says, or doesn't say and doesn't do, is absolutely right—ah, that is beyond price! No poor forms and ceremony shall stand between Bridget and me!

I lifted the letters, and had no difficulty in selecting the one which would "give me joy". Strangely enough, it was written by one of the newest of my friends, one whose very existence had been unknown to me two years before.

We had met at a summer hotel where Kathie and I chanced to be staying, and never shall I forget my first sight of Charmion Fane as she trailed into the dining-room and seated herself at a small table opposite our own. She was so tall and pale and shadowy in the floating grey chiffon cloak that covered her white dress, she lay back in her chair with such languor, and drooped her heavy eyelids

with an air of such superfine indifference to her fellow-men, that Kathie and I decided then and there that she was succumbing to the effects of a dangerous operation, and—with care—might be expected to last six or eight weeks.

We held fast to this conclusion till the next morning, when we met our invalid striding over the moors, clad in abbreviated tweeds, and the manniest of hard felt hats. Kathie said that she was plain. I said, "Well, not plain exactly, but *queer*!" At dinner the same night, we amended the verdict, and voted her "rather nice". Twenty-four hours later she represented our ideal of female charm, and we figuratively wept and rent our garments because she exhibited no interest in our charming selves. An inspection of the visitors' book proved that her name was "Mrs. Fane," but that was not particularly enlightening, especially as no home address was given.

But on the third day, just as we were beginning to concoct dark schemes by means of which we could force acquaintanceship, the "gray lady" entered the lounge, marched unhesitatingly across to our corner, stood staring down at us as we sat on the sofa, and said shortly:—

"This is ridiculous! We are wasting time! We three are the only really interesting people in the hotel; we are dying to know each other—and we know it! Come for a walk!" And lo! in another

minute we were on the high road, Kathie on one side, I on the other, gazing at her with adoring eyes, while she said briskly :—

“My name is Charmion Fane. I am quite alone. No children. Thirty-two. I don't live anywhere in particular. Just prowl round from one place to another. If there are any other dull, necessary details that you want to know, ask!—and get them over. Then we can talk!”

We laughed, and replied with similar biographical sketches on our own account, and then we *did* talk—about books, and travels, and hobbies, and mankind in general, and gradually, growing more and more intimate (or rather *conscious* of our intimacy, for we were *friends* after the first hour!), of our personal hopes, fears, difficulties, and mental outlooks.

When we came in, Kathie and I faced each other in our bedroom, almost incoherent with pleasure and excitement.

“*Well!* What an afternoon! My dear, isn't she——” Kathie waved her hands to express a superlative beyond the power of words.

“She is!”

“The most fascinating, the most interesting, the most original——”

“And she likes us, too! As much as we like her. Isn't it glorious?”

“She hasn't spoken to another soul. How could

we have called her plain! Evelyn, did you notice that she never spoke of her husband? She wears grey and violet, so he has probably been dead for some years, but she never referred to him in the slightest possible way."

"Would it be likely, Kathie, in our very first talk?"

"Yes!" declared Kathie sturdily. "Not intentionally, perhaps, but with ordinary people it would have slipped out. '*We* went to Italy. My husband liked this or that.' She never advanced even as far as the '*we*'. She must have been dreadfully, dreadfully fond of him!"

I wondered! The death of a beloved husband or wife is a devastating blow; but when the memory is beautiful, time softens it into a hallowed sweetness. It is the bitter sorrow which refuses to be healed, which fills the heart with a ceaseless unrest. Not even to Kathie would I express my doubts, but the conviction weighed upon me that the cloud which hung over Charmion Fane was the remembrance of unhappiness rather than joy!

For the next fortnight the greater part of our time was spent in Charmion's company; generally we were a party of three, but in every day there came a precious hour or so when I had her alone, and hugged the secret confidence that the *tête-à-tête* was as welcome to her as to myself.

Everything that was to be told about my own

uneventful life she knew before many days were passed, but of her own past she never spoke. From incidental remarks we found that she had been the godchild of a well-known politician long since dead, and that at eighteen she had been presented at Court, which two discoveries proved useful, as they were enough to convince the aunts that Charmion was a safe and desirable acquaintance.

Before she was twenty the scene had apparently shifted to America, where she had lived for several years, and presumably—though she never said so—had met her husband and spent her brief married life. Widowed — childless — thirty-two. Those few words supplied all that I knew of Charmion Fane, except the obvious facts which were patent to the eye.

She was oddly undemonstrative, and for all her charm had a manner which made it impossible to approach one step nearer than she herself decreed. Even when it came to the moment of saying good-bye, I could not tell whether she wished to continue our friendship, or would be 'content to let it drop as a passing incident of travel; but to my joy she held on to my hand with a grip which was almost an appeal, and her thin, finely-cut lips twitched once and again. She looked full into my face with her strange eyes, the pupil large, the iris a light grey, ringed with an edge of black, and said simply, "I'll miss you! But—it will go on. We will

always be friends." That was all, and during the two years which had passed since that day we had met only once, for another short summer holiday, and repeated invitations to The Clough had received the same refusal—"I am not ready for visit-making".

Letters I had received in plenty, and she had sent Kathie a handsome—really an extraordinarily handsome gift on her marriage, and to me the dearest of letters, understanding everything without being told, entering into my varying moods with exquisite comprehension. In return, I had poured out my heart, telling her of my loneliness, my difficulty about the next step, and now, at last, here came the reply.

I sent Bridget away, drank my tea at a gulp, and settled down to read in luxurious enjoyment. It was a longer letter than I had yet received, and I had a premonition that it would clear the way. But I did not realise how epoch-making it was to prove.

"DEAR EVELYN WASTNEYS,—I've been through it, my dear, and I know! It doesn't bear talking of, so we *won't* talk, but just pass on. What next? you ask. I have been trying to solve that problem for the last four years, and am no nearer a solution, so I can't tell you, my dear, but I have an idea which might possibly provide a half-way house for us both till the clouds lift.

“This summer I happened—literally happened!—upon a small country place about two hours’ rail from town. An agent would describe it as a ‘desirable gentleman’s residence, comprising four entertaining rooms and eight bedrooms, glass, stabling, and grounds of four acres, artistically laid out’. But never mind the agent; take it from me that that house is ideal. Long, low, irregular rooms just waiting to be made beautiful; no set garden, but a wilderness of flowers, and a belt of real woodland; dry soil, all the sun that is to be had, and an open country-side agreeably free from villadom. I was tempted—badly tempted, but could not face settling down alone. Only last week the agent wrote to me again.

“Evelyn, we fit each other; we are friends by instinct. How would you like to take that house with me for the next two or three years, and furnish it between us with our best ‘bits’?

“Understand, before we go any further—not for a moment do I suggest that we settle down to a definite home, and a jog-trot country life. I couldn’t stand it for one, and I doubt whether you could either, but—we suit each other, Evelyn; there’s that mysterious psychological link between us which makes it good to be together. I have a feeling that we could put in some good times in that house!

“Financially, it would be an economy—we

should save storage of furniture, and have a convenient refuge in case of illness. The place is cheap, and could be run with quite a small staff, and would be a pleasant means of returning hospitalities. We could settle down for as long as it suited us—three months, two months, a few weeks, as the case might be—and then, when the impulse to roam came upon us, we should simply rise up and depart. I should never ask where you were going. If you asked me, I should not reply. Probably I should not know. On certain months of the year the house might become the exclusive property of one owner, when she might invite her own friends, and disport herself as she pleased. Again, we might devote a certain period to charity, and entertain lame dogs. There's no end to the good and the pleasure that might be got out of that house. 'Pastimes' is its name; isn't it quaint and suggestive? And on the enclosed sheet you will behold elaborate calculations of the sum which it would cost to run. The figures are *over* the mark, for I never delude myself by under-calculating in money matters. For my own part, I can pay up, and have enough over to wander at will. Can you do the same? If not, say no at once, and the project is buried for evermore. You must not be tied. I refuse to be a party to shutting you up in the depths of the country for the whole year round. You have had enough of that. What you

need now is movement, and the jostle of other lives ; but if, in addition, you can afford a rest-house, a summer lodgment, a sanatorium for mind and body, and a meeting-place with a friend, then pack your box, Evelyn, come and look at Pastimes with me !

“Your friend,
“CHARMION FANE.”

I threw down the letter and seized the sheet of calculations in an agony of eagerness. A glance at the final addition brought relief. Yes ! I could do it—pay my full share, and still have a handsome margin left over. Once satisfied on that point, there could not be a moment's hesitation, for it would be glorious to share a house with Charmion, and to have her companionship for some months of each year. My whole life was transfixed by the prospect, and yet she was right ! I could not have accepted the offer if it had meant a permanent settling down to a luxurious country life. I was too restless, too eager for experience, too anxious to discover my very own work, and to do it in my very own way.

The picture of that old English house, with its panelled rooms, set in a surrounding wealth of flowers and green, gripped hold of my imagination ; but here was an odd thing. It was powerless to banish another picture, in which there was no rose and no blue, but only dull neutral tints—the picture

of a basement flat in a grey London road, with electric burners instead of sun, and for view, a vista of passing feet belonging to bodies cut off from sight.

I could not, even for Charmion, give up the prospect of that flat, and all that it had come to mean; but—let me acknowledge it honestly—it was balm and relief to know that I could have a means of escape, and that at culminating moments of weariness, when everything seemed wry and disappointing, and the whole weight of seven storeys seemed to be pressing down on my brains, I could bang my door, turn the key, and fly off to peace and beauty, and a healing pandering to personal tastes!

Woman is a complex character, and I am no better than my kind. I feel it in me to be an angel of self-denial and patience for, say, the third of the year! I know for a certain fact that I should have a bad lapse if I tried to keep it up for the remaining thirds. Now, thanks to Charmion, the way was made easy, and I could put my hand to the plough without fear of drawing back.

I leapt out of bed in a tingle of excitement. Impossible to lie still when things were happening at such a rapid rate. The sun was shining, and, looking at a belt of trees in the distance, I could catch a faint shimmer of green. It is perhaps the most intoxicating moment of the year, when

that first gleam of spring greets the eye, and this special year it held an added exhilaration, for it seemed to speak of the budding of fresh personal life.

I laughed; I sang; the depression of the last weeks fell from me like a cloak, and I faced the future glad and undismayed. With the reading of that letter had come an end to indecision. I now knew exactly what I was about to do. Write to Charmion, and fix the earliest possible date for a meeting in town. From town we would inspect Pastimes, the while I instituted inquiries for a suitable flat. The two homes secured, I would then return to The Clough, and divide my furniture into two batches, send them off to their several destinations, and follow myself, hot foot. It would take some time to put both dwellings in order, but it would be interesting work. I love the making of interiors, and if Pastimes must be fitted beautifully to do justice to itself, still more would it be needful to turn the uninspiring "flat" into a haven of comfort and cheer.

At this precise moment my prancing brought me in front of the long mirror, and what I beheld therein brought me up with a gasp. Twenty-six is quite a venerable age, *but* at moments of happiness and exhilaration it has a disconcerting trick of switching back to seventeen. That smiling, bright-eyed, pink-and-white-cheeked girl in the

glass, with two long pigtails of hair hanging to her waist, looked really absurdly juvenile! Given a small stretch of imagination, you might have believed that she was a flapper preparing for her last term at school; by no possible mental effort could you have placed her as a *douce* maiden lady, living alone in London, devoting herself to good works in a manner as adventurous as it was unusual.

Mothers of children would insinuate that I was a child myself; troubled matrons would purse their lips, and say, "I can't tell *you*, my dear. You are too young." Certainly, oh, most certainly, men of all ages would put me down as a designing minx! In vain industry, self-sacrifice and generosity—that young face, that bright youthful colouring would nullify all my efforts.

It was true—it was true! I looked, as Aunt Eliza had pointed out, a dozen years too young for the part. People would stare, people would talk, people would advise me to go back and live with my aunts, and wait ten years.

In a frenzy of impatience I seized the two long plaits, and twisted them now this way, now that. Astonishing the difference which hair-dressing can make! I have read of a heroine who passed successfully as her own twin sister by the simple device of plainly brushed hair and puritanical garments, the sister, of course, sporting marcelle waves and Parisian costumes. I dipped my brush

in the water-jug and dragged back my own hair in a plastered mass, clamping the plaits to my head. I looked like a Dutch doll! Clean and chubby, and, alas! considerably younger than before. I parted it in the middle, and glued it over my ears. I looked like a naughty schoolgirl, who had had her hair dressed by a maiden aunt. I piled the plaits in a coronet over my forehead; I looked like a portrait of a Norwegian damsel dressed for her bridal. I threw down the brush in disgust, and stamped with impatience.

No use! Not a bit of use! All the hair-dressing in the world could not make me look old, or even approximately middle-aged. The ugliest flannel blouse that was ever made, while it would certainly be hideously unbecoming, could not add one year, let alone ten, to my age.

It was a bitter blow. All that morning I went about pondering the desperate question of how to look old. Aunt Emmeline had prophesied that I should know soon enough, "with those beaked features," but I wanted to know *now*, not in any permanent, disagreeable fashion, but as a kind of sleight-of-hand trick, by which I could be mature one day and the next in blooming youth. Elderly in London, young at Pastimes. A douce, unremarkable "body" in the basement flat, and in Surrey a lady of leisure, rings on her fingers and bells on her toes!

Aunt Eliza would have cried once more, "Oh, don't be silly!" if I had confronted her with such a problem. I said, "Don't be silly!" to myself many times over in the course of that day, but I persisted in being silly all the same. At the back of my mind lingered the conviction that if I went on thinking long enough a solution would come.

How could I manage to look old? I asked the question of myself every hour of the next few days. I asked it of everyone I met, and was fatuously assured that I demanded the impossible; at long last I asked it of old Bridget, whose sound common sense had come to my rescue times and again.

"Sure, my dear, your husband will manage that for you!" was Bridget's instant solution.

"Not the husband I shall choose!" I replied with easy assurance.

A moment's pause was devoted to the problematical Prince Charming whose mission it would be to keep me *young*, then I asked tentatively:—

"What shall I look like, Bridget, when I am old?"

Bridget folded her arms and regarded me with a critical stare.

"Your hair will turn grey, and them fine straight brows of yours will grow thin, or maybe fall out altogether, and leave you with none. An' you'll wear spectacles, and have lines round your eyes. But it's neither the grey hairs nor the specs

that spoils the looks. It's not *them* that's the worst!"

I stared at her open-mouthed, trembling between shrinking and curiosity.

"*It's the shape of the cheeks!*" said Bridget darkly. "Yourself now, and the ladies of your age, it's pretty, slim bits of faces you have, going to a peak at the chin. When you're old, it runs to squares and doubles. Look to your cheeks, miss, if you wants to keep young!" She unfolded her arms, stretched them at full length, and comfortably folded them again. Her broad chest heaved in a cackle of amused reminiscence.

"Sure, d'ye reminder Miss Kathleen when she play-acted the ould lady, the last Christmas party?"

Poor old Bridget! She got the surprise of her life in my reception of that simple question. Jumping out of my chair, dancing round, whooping and hurraying "like a daft thing," as she afterwards described my movements. Then to find herself at one moment enthusiastically patted on the back, and at the next to be pushed towards the door, and exhorted to hurry!—hurry!—to mount to the attic, and bring down the old tin box—well, it was disconcerting, to say the least of it, and Bridget's dignity was visibly upset. She had forgotten that all the "make ups" which we had used for various Christmas festivals were stored away in that old tin box, and consequently could not guess that I was

fired with an ambition to try on Kathie's disguise forthwith.

Ten minutes later I was standing before the glass and enthusiastically acclaiming the truth of Bridget's statement, as I stared at the reflection of a spectacled dame with grizzled eyebrows, grey hair banded smoothly over the ears, and a bulging fullness at the base of each cheek! It *was* the cheeks that made the disguise! Spectacles and hair still left the personality of the face untouched; even the bushy eyebrows were but a partial disguise, but with the insertion of those small india-rubber pads came an utter and radical change. That chubby, square-faced woman was not Evelyn Wastneys. Never by any possibility could she see forty again. So far as propriety went, she might roam alone from one end of the world to the other. If she lived in the largest block of flats that was ever erected, her neighbours would regard her comings and goings with serene indifference. Admirable woman! She did *not* "take the eye". I met her spectacled glance with a beam of approval.

"I have it!—I have it! I must *dress* for the part! In London I'll be a middle-aged aunt; in Surrey, a niece—my own niece and namesake, who, of her charity, consents to receive some of her auntie's *protégées* and give them a good time!" The wildness, the audacity of the project made to me its chief appeal. My life interest had been so

sheltered, so hedged round by convention, that at times it had seemed as though there was a wall of division between me and every other human creature. It was so difficult to show oneself in one's *real* colours, to see and know other people as they really were. But now!—oh, what a unique and exhilarating experience it would be to taste at the same time the romance of youth and the freedom of age, to witness the different sides of other characters as exhibited in their treatment of aunt and niece.

That one illuminating suggestion of Bridget's has cleared the way. From the moment of hearing there had been no real hesitation ; before night fell my plans were made, and a telegram to Charmion was speeding on its way. A new life lay before me—a dual life, teeming with interest and possibility. On one hand, my fate must be to some extent bound up with that of Charmion Fane, the most interesting and, in a sense, mysterious woman I had ever met ; on the other, I was plunging into the unknown, and transforming myself into a new personality, to meet the new circumstances. I stared at myself in the glass and solemnly shook my grey head.

“ Evelyn, my dear, be prepared ! You are going to have an adventurous time ! ”

CHAPTER IV

A TALK IN LONDON

THE aunts expressed a mitigated approval of Charmion's proposal. Mrs. Fane came of a good family, and was "very well left". Her married estate, moreover, gave her the privilege of chaperonage, so that the dual establishment might be quite a good arrangement, all things considered, "*until—*"

"*Until!*" echoed Aunt Eliza eloquently, nodding coyly at me, while I stared into space with basilisk calm. I object to references to my problematical marriage—especially by aunts. The great "*until*" never arrived for them, yet they feel quite annoyed because twenty-six has found me still a spinster!

I made my journey to London with a sense of great adventure, Bridget going with me in the dual rôle of maid and mentor. She was the only person who was to accompany me into the new life, and experience had proved that her sound common sense might be trusted to act as a brake on the wheels of my own impetuosity. We stayed the morning in town, when I interviewed a house

agent, and set him on the search for suitable flats, and then we adjourned to the West End to buy a becoming new hat. It always soothes me to buy hats. In times of doubt and depression it is an admirable tonic to the feminine mind. At three o'clock we left Waterloo for our two hours' journey, and arrived at the old-fashioned inn, which was to act as rendezvous, before half-past five.

Charmion was awaiting us in a private sitting-room, long, oak-beamed, spotlessly clean, and a trifle musty, with that faint but unmistakable mustiness which hangs about old rooms and old furniture. Tea was set out on one half of the oak dining-table. The china was of the old-fashioned white and gold order, the cups very wide at the brim and cramped at the handle, and possessing a dear little surprise rose at the base, which peeped out through a hoar frost of sugar as you drained the last gulp. Charmion laughed at my delight over that rose, but I was in the mood to be pleased, to see happy auguries in trivial happenings. I hailed that rose as a type of unexpected joys.

Charmion was dressed in business-like grey tweeds, with a soft grey felt hat slouched over her head. She looked very pale, very frail, intensely, vibrantly alive. This extraordinary contradiction between body and mind made a charm and mystery which it is difficult to express in words. One longed to protect and shield her, to tuck her up on

a sofa, and tend her like a fragile child, at the very same moment that mentally one was sitting at her feet, domineered by the influence of a master mind!

I ate an enormous tea, and Charmion crumbled a piece of cake upon her plate; then we had the things taken away, and drew up to the fire, and toasted our toes, and looked into each other's eyes, and exclaimed simultaneously—" *Well?* "

Hitherto we had talked on general subjects, Kathleen's marriage, the break-up of the old home, my own journey, etc., but now we were free from interruption for an hour at least, and the great subject could be safely tackled.

" Evelyn! Do you realise that *nothing* is settled, and that nothing need be, unless you are absolutely, whole-heartedly *sure?* "

" I am absolutely whole-hearted about several things already. What sort of things were *you* thinking about? "

" Well, take the house first. It meets *my* ideal, but it mayn't be yours. You must promise to give an unvarnished opinion."

" Make your mind easy! If there is one thing that I may claim to be above all others, it is 'unvarnished'. I have a brutal frankness in expressing my own opinion. If, through nice feeling, I try to disguise it, my manner shrieks it aloud! "

" That's all right then. I'm glad to hear it. Next comes the question of time. We should have to

take a lease of three years. I don't know if you'd care to bind yourself for so long."

That reminded me of the aunts' "until," and I said solemnly, "Charmion, tell me the worst. Is there an eligible bachelor who owns the next 'place' ready to discover me picking his roses, or trespassing on his side of the stream, and to make love to me forthwith? They always *do* in books, you know, when girls go to live in country houses."

Charmion smiled her slow, languorous smile.

"I have amused myself with looking up the names of the people living in all the big houses around. They seem uniformly made up of couples. To the best of my belief, there is not a single man, bachelor or widower, within many miles."

I said, "Oh!" and felt the faint, natural dismay which any human girl would feel in the circumstances. Charmion herself was enough romance for the present, and a precipitate "lover next door" would for the moment have been *de trop*, but still——

My expression (unvarnished!) evidently betrayed my feelings, for Charmion smiled, sighed, and stretched out a caressing hand.

"Let's be honest. It is foolish to set up a partnership in the dark. Is there *anyone*, Evelyn, who may swoop down upon us at a moment's notice, and carry you off to share *his* house?"

"To the best of my knowledge there is not a solitary one. I'm quite sure of one thing, and that

is, that however wildly he swooped, I wouldn't go!"

"But there must be—you are so pretty, Evelyn, and so attractive—there must *have* been."

"Oh yes; two. But not real lovers, Charmion, only—*prétendus*. One was young and needy and ambitious, and thought that I should look very well sitting at the head of his table. Incidentally, that my money would be useful to provide the table and the things upon it. The other—he was rather a dear, and he cared enough to give me a pang. But he was happily married last year to a girl who is as *un*-like me in every respect as you can possibly imagine. They are both ancient history now."

"And you? You yourself? You have never been in love?"

If any other woman had asked me such a question there would have been short shrift with her. Charmion herself had never before attempted such personalities; but now, when she deemed it necessary, she spoke without a flicker of hesitation, her grey eyes staring full into mine. It would have seemed ridiculous to take offence.

"Once. At first sight. Quite bowled over. We met at an hotel."

She knew what I meant, made a dainty little grimace, and bent her head in a small bow of acknowledgment, which somehow managed to look quite regal and stately. I longed to put one or two

questions in return. Widows *have* been known to marry again ! Why should I not wish to be reassured on my own account ? Why should it be wrong for me to force confidences, when she herself had led the way ? It would *not* be wrong ; it would be right, and prudent, and praiseworthy. The only objection was, *I could not do it*. After that little bow of acknowledgment, Charmion threw back her head until it rested on the high cushioned back of her chair.

“ That’s settled then,” she said quietly.

Her heavy lids drooped over her eyes, her fine white hands were folded in her lap. There was in voice and manner an air of finality, which was as impervious as a barrier of barbed wire. Not for any bribe in the world would I have attempted to scale it.

The next morning, bright and early, we chartered a “ fly,” and lumbered along two miles of country lanes, and then, suddenly turning a corner, found ourselves at the gate of Pastimes. It was a dull, grey day, of which I was glad, for *any* place can look attractive in spring sunshine. I have seen even a third-rate London square look quite frisky and inviting with a shimmer of green over the black trees, and the spring-cleaned windows sending out flashes of light ; it’s a very different spectacle on a November afternoon. Five minutes’ acquaintance with Pastimes showed, however, that its

predominating quality was cheerfulness. There was a great deal of panelling on the walls, but it was of white wood, not oak, and the old, small latticed windows had been converted into deep bays, filled with great panes of plate glass—a pagan proceeding from an artistic point of view, but infinitely cheerful and healthy. There was a large central hall from either side of which opened two rooms of medium size, facing respectively east and west; a quaint descent of two steps led the way to a really spacious drawing-room, through the great windows of which was a lovely vista of velvet lawn, and a great cedar drooping its green branches to the ground.

Parallel with the drawing-room, and also facing south, was a long glassed-in apartment which had evidently been used to harbour plants, garden-chairs, and impedimenta, but which revealed itself to our eyes as an ideal sun-parlour for chilly days. Sheltered from draughts by the outstanding walls, yet with a glass roof and frontage to catch every ray of sun, the parlour would be an ideal refuge for spring and autumn. So far as public rooms went, we were well off with five apartments at the disposal of two people.

“Mine!—yours!—*ours*!” cried Charmion, waving her hands descriptively, first towards the two smaller rooms, and then to the other three in turn.

“In the hall we will eat; the big room shall be

no ordinary formal drawing-room, but a living-room *à deux*. The sun-parlour also we shall share, but the 'sulkies' shall be private ground, hermetically sealed against intruders! There is a spare room upstairs which can be spared for muddles. I have a fastidiously tidy eye. It *offends* me to see things scattered about, but my hands *will* go on scattering them, so it is necessary for my peace of mind to have a muddle-room where I can deposit bundles at a moment's notice, and feel sure that they will not be tidied away. Well, shall we go upstairs and see the bedrooms?"

"Where *are* the stairs?" I asked curiously, for from no corner of the hall was there a glimpse of staircase visible. I had not thought about it before, but now I realised that it was just this absence which gave that touch of comfort and privacy which is wanting in the ordinary entrance "lounge". There was no draughty well, no galleried space overhead, from which curious ears could overhear private confidences. I stared round mystified, till Charmion opened yet another doorway, and behold! there was the staircase, the oddest, curliest specimen of its kind, mounting up and up within a narrow well, for all the world like the steps in a church tower, except that these were wide and shallow, and that a thick brass rod had been placed on the outer wall to act as a banister in the case of need. Whoever had built Pastimes had plainly believed that

stairs were needed for the purpose of transit only, and had refused to waste space on their adornment.

On the first landing were several good bedrooms, two of which possessed big sunny balconies, facing south.

"That settles it!" I told Charmion. "If I had had any doubts before, the balconies would have decided me, once for all. All my life I have yearned to have a bedroom opening on to a really big balcony. I'm crazy about balconies! Think of the happy hours one has spent on balconies in Switzerland and Italy! To have been in a room without one would have been to lose half the joy. And even in England—think of all the things one can do on a balcony of one's very own. Sleep out when it is hot. Air your mattress. Hang up your sponge. Grow your pet flowers. Dry your hair. Cry it out quietly when you feel blue. Sentimentalise over the railings when you feel *rose*."

Charmion's fine brows arched, her lids drooped over her eyes. I recognised the same expression which her face had worn the night before, when for a moment I had seemed on the point of questioning her about her own romance. Once more I felt myself up against an impenetrable wall of reserve, and hastily switched the conversation to the more prosaic topic of cupboards. The very sound of a balcony bristles with romance, but cupboards may be discussed with safety under the most lacer-

ating circumstances. There is something comfortably safe and stodgy about them. And Pastimes was so rich in this respect that we spent a happy half-hour appointing their future uses, and jotting down notes for their improvement.

Later on we visited the gardens, beautiful even in their sleep, and promising a very paradise for summer days. The lawns and flower beds immediately around the house were exquisitely in order, but by far the greater part of the grounds was uncultivated. There was a strip of *real* woodland, where the light filtered down through the branches of tall old trees on to a carpet of dried leaves and bracken, through which could be seen the close-growing green shoots which foretold a harvest of bulbs. Later on no doubt there would be primroses and bluebells, and when summer came, if I knew anything about it, there would be two hammocks swinging between spreading branches, and two happy women reposing therein. It was this *real* country air which gave Pastimes its chief charm.

That evening Charmion came to my room, and we sat together by the fire and talked for three solid hours. As a rule, I get fidgety in the evening when talk is the only amusement, but I can sit and listen to Charmion for as long as she chooses to go on. She is—interesting! She says things in an interesting way, and has interesting things to say. I have met extraordinarily clever and well-

informed people who are terrible bores. Charmion would be interesting if she told one how to make an egg flip! As I watched the delicate play of expression on the tired face, which was yet so thrillingly alive, as I listened to the slow soft drawl of her voice, I felt a sudden rush of thankfulness and exhilaration.

“Charmion!” I cried suddenly, “aren’t you *thankful* to be rich?”

She flinched as though I had struck her, and turned upon me a wild-eyed look of affront.

“Rich? Who says I am rich? Who has been talking about my affairs? Have you—have you been making inquiries to find out what I am worth?”

I stared, deeply offended.

“I have not. Perhaps it would have been more business-like if I *had*, but I accepted your word. I asked a simple question because at the moment I happened to be feeling particularly thankful that I could afford to share Pastimes with you, and I imagined that you might possibly feel the same.”

I paused, waiting expectantly for words of apology and excuse, but none came. Charmion stared at me below knitted brows, and said shortly:—

“Yes, it is true. You ought to have business references. You shall *have* them! My lawyer shall write to you at once. I was a wretch to speak so sharply, Evelyn, but—you touched a sore point!

Thankful? No, indeed! Money is a curse. The greatest handicap a woman can have. If I had my life to live again, I should choose to be a penniless working girl!"

She had taken off her rings and dropped them in a sparkling little heap on her lap, the while she softly polished her long pink nails. Her padded kimona was of pink silk, heavily embroidered with roses, her feet were thrust into slippers of the same shade and material. A more luxurious figure it would be difficult to imagine. I rolled an expressive eye, and she shrugged her shoulders in response.

"Oh, of course, I am an artificial product, and the chains hold fast. I don't take any particular interest in my appearance, but it is an ingrained habit to go through a certain routine. It would annoy me to have dull nails, so I polish them as you see; also, though I am dead tired, I shall have my hair brushed for half an hour before going to bed, and then steam my foolish face. It bores me profoundly, but it would bore me more to feel unkempt. So far as that goes, I should do exactly the same on twopence a week!"

"Minus a maid and appliances?"

Charmion shrugged daintily.

"Soap and water are cheap, fortunately."

"I beg your pardon! Not *your* kind of soap. You might find even hot water a difficulty. I imagine that girls on twopence a week have to

consider the price of boiling a kettle. Their hot water is not 'laid on'. Moreover, the poor dears must be 'dead tired,' in a way which you and I cannot even imagine."

"It is their life," Charmion said loftily.

"Excuse me—I mean to *live*! That's why I am thankful to have money, because it gives me more scope to live thoroughly."

"Poor innocent! What a delusion. Money shuts the door of your cage. A golden cage, excellently padded, but—*its bars shut out all the best things of life!*"

I laughed again, for the statement was so opposed to all accepted theories.

"*What* best things, for example?"

"Confidence," said Charmion solemnly. "Trust in one's fellow creatures." She lifted her heavy lids as she spoke, and her eyes looked into mine. In their grey depths was a blank, empty expression, which once seen is never forgotten, for it speaks of a hurt so deep and keen that the memory of it breaks the heart. I leapt from my seat and wrapped Charmion in my arms.

"Oh, my dear, my dear, there is one person you can trust! Whatever happens, Charmion, you can count on me! Darling! I know you have had troubles. I don't ask to hear about them. I only want to be allowed to love you, and to do all I can to help and to comfort. Never, never be afraid to

ask for anything I can do. I would put you before myself, Charmion, if it ever came to a choice between our different interests—I would indeed! Don't you believe it is true?"

She laid her two hands on my shoulders and smiled.

"You dear thing! I believe it is. You would sacrifice yourself for me, and I should accept the sacrifice. It is the way we are made. You to give, and I to demand. Let us pray, my dear, that the day may never come when our interests do clash. Of a certainty, poor Evelyn, you would come off worse!"

CHAPTER V

PASTIMES—AND MR. MAPLESTONE

THE next morning, bright and early, we called on the house-agent to sign and seal the agreement which should make us the happy owners of Pastimes for a term of years agreeably elastic.

Mr. Edwards was a small, dapper little man, typically house-agenty in manner, even to the point of assuring us gravely that another tenant was urgently in the field, and that we had secured our lease by the very skin of our teeth.

Charmion lifted incredulous eyebrows.

"But, Mr. Edwards, you wrote to me a second time, only a fortnight ago, to say the house was still on your hands!"

"Quite so, madam. And it was. But only on Monday Mr. Maplestone motored over from Wembly. Mr. Maplestone is Squire there—a very influential gentleman in these parts. He is looking out a house for a relative, and had only just heard that Pastimes was vacant. He drove over, as I say, and telegraphed to his friend that the house was too good to lose. He expected a reply this evening."

“When it will be too late!” Charmion said calmly. “You told him, of course, that you were in treaty with another tenant?”

“I did, madam. Quite so. But”—the little man hesitated, and fidgeted uncomfortably—“Mr. Maplestone is—er—accustomed to get his own way! I explained that I must accept a definite offer, and that you had the first option, but I am afraid that he hardly realises——”

Charmion waved an imperial hand.

“We are not concerned with Mr. Maplestone, or what he expects. Pastimes is ours, and that settles the question. To-morrow morning Miss Wastneys and I will meet you at eleven o’clock, to go over the house together. It is in good order, but we shall require a little decoration and painting here and there. You will be able to advise us how to get it done well and quickly. When I say quickly I *mean* quickly! Plenty of men must be put on to begin the work and *finish* it in a few days’ time, not one or two who will drag on for weeks. You can get us an estimate for time, as well as for cost.”

Mr. Edwards bowed, murmured, and waved his hands. He looked overcome, poor man, as well he might, for if one would-be client demanded his own way, the other was obviously determined to have hers. Between the two his path was not easy! I smiled at him ingratiatingly, just to help things

along, but he took little notice of me. Obviously, in Charmion's company I did *not* "take the eye!"

On the way home I expressed sympathy for the disappointed Mr. Maplestone, but Charmion refused to agree.

"I don't know the man, so his pleasures and disappointments don't enter into my sphere. Promiscuous universal sympathy is too great a tax on the nervous system. Why should I distress myself about a man I have never seen?"

"Not distress yourself exactly, but you might cast a kindly thought. He will be disappointed, and the poor little agent will have a bad half-hour."

"Now you are asking sympathy for the agent, too! Evelyn, aren't you the least little bit in the world inclined to wear your heart on your sleeve?"

"Charmion, aren't you the least little bit inclined to be hard?"

She agreed with unflinching candour.

"I am. It's the safer plan if one doesn't want to be hurt!"

"But—what about the other people? Mayn't they be hurt instead?"

She looked at me gravely for a moment, then with a smile which grew gradually broad and roguish.

"We ought to strike a happy mean between us, eh, Evelyn? You are all credulity and gush, and I refuse to disturb myself about other people, or their affairs."

"That's not true! You disturbed yourself about me!"

"Because it affected myself. I had grown fond of you, and so you entered into my life. Pure selfishness, my dear!"

"I don't believe it! I won't believe it! It's no good trying to disillusion me, Charmion. I've put you on a topmost pinnacle, and it would take a mighty effort to tumble you down!"

"Dear thing!" murmured Charmion fondly. "Well—suppose we talk of the drawing-room walls? I'm a great believer in occupying oneself with the next step. Revelations of character will follow in due course—I plump for white!"

"White certainly. A warm cream white, with not a touch of blue in it. And the prevailing colour?"

"Let's count three quickly, and then each say what we think!"

We counted, and the two words leapt crisply forth.

"Rose!" said I.

"Purple!" said Charmion. Then we looked at one another beneath puckered brows.

"Rose lights up better!"

"Purple is more uncommon."

"Rose is more cheerful in winter!"

"Purple is restful in summer!"

It seemed for a moment as if we had reached an *impasse*, then came an illuminating thought.

"Why not—both? They harmonise well. Purple curtains and carpet—the plain colour, very soft and subdued, and cushions and shades of the right rose. With our united treasures we ought to have a lovely room. Where *are* your things, Charmion?"

"Stored," she said shortly. "I tried a house for a few months, but it was too lonely an experience. But I have a passion for beautiful furniture. It has amused me to pick up good specimens here and there. Now we shall enjoy them together! Wait till you see my Spanish leather screen!"

"Wait till you see my Chinese cabinet!" I retorted, and we talked "things" industriously for the next hour.

After luncheon Charmion settled herself to write business letters, drawing a big screen round her writing table, the better, as she informed me, to protect herself against my chatter.

"You promise to be quiet, but in five minutes' time you begin again! Now please to remember that to all intents and purposes I am in another room, and that until I choose to come forth, I am dead to you and everyone else! Do you understand? These letters positively must get off to-night!"

"Dear me! I don't want to talk! I shall be thankful to sit by the fire and enjoy a quiet read," I said loftily, and promptly drew up an old arm-chair,

and buried myself in the book which I had bought to while away the hours of my journey, and then left unread, because my own affairs were at the moment so much more absorbing than those of a fictitious heroine. Now that my mind was more at ease, I found the story interesting enough, and had read on for about an hour with undisturbed enjoyment, when suddenly the door was flung open, and a voice announced:—

“Mr. Maplestone!”

I leapt up, putting up a hasty hand to smooth my ruffled hair. That was the worst of having only one sitting-room! Visitors were hurled in upon one without a moment's warning. Happy Charmion behind the screen! I stared across the room and beheld a tall—very tall—thin man, with short reddish hair and light blue, angry-looking eyes. He was dressed in riding costume, which, so far as his figure went, became him exceedingly well. He was probably somewhere about thirty-five, and one glance at his tightly-set lips and firm square chin was enough to demonstrate the truth of Mr. Edwards' assertion that he was “a gentleman who likes his own way”. He had probably heard by now that for once he was to be thwarted, and had come to tell me what he thought about it. At this moment I forgot to be sorry for his disappointment in my exceeding sympathy for myself! I glanced helplessly at the screen.

"Mrs. Fane, I believe."

"I am Miss Wastneys. Mrs. Fane is engaged. Perhaps it is something that I——"

He laid his hat and stick on the table.

"May I have a few minutes' conversation? You will allow me to sit down?"

"Certainly."

I pushed aside the easy-chair and seated myself on one of the six "uprights" which were ranged about the room. It felt so much more business-like and supporting. Mr. Maplestone seated himself opposite to me, and rested his hands on his knees.

"I am told that you have some idea of renting a house called Pastimes, near here!"

"We have taken Pastimes. Mrs. Fane and myself have this morning signed the lease."

He waved an impatient hand.

"This morning! So I am told. Edwards has behaved very badly. I warned him that things should not be hurried through."

"They have not been hurried. It is several months since Mrs. Fane first saw the house, and three weeks since negotiations were opened a second time."

"I only heard this week that the house was vacant."

"And should Mr. Edwards"—(the innocent inquiry of my voice was growing more and more marked)—"was it his duty to have told you?"

His eyes sent out a flash. I could see the muscles of his hand clench against his knee. I had scored a point, and his anger was correspondingly increased.

“Perhaps I had better explain,” he began in a tone of elaborate forbearance. “I live at Wembly. Most of the land between here and there belongs to me. Pastimes happens to be outside the limit, and so it escaped my memory. I have not been over it before. I did not know the last tenants. For the last few weeks I have been looking for a house for my friend—a member of the family who is returning from abroad. Invalided!”

He pronounced the last word with emphasis, staring fixedly at me the while. I adapted my features to express polite commiseration.

“It is natural that he should wish to live within driving distance of his friends.”

“Oh, quite!”

“The moment that I saw Pastimes I knew for a sure thing that it would be just his house——”

“I am sorry, but as he has not seen it, he can’t be disappointed. There must be other houses——”

“I have already said I have been searching round for—the—last—three—weeks,” Mr. Maplestone repeated, in the carefully deliberate tone which disguises irritation. “Nothing else will suit anything like so well.”

I murmured indefinitely, and glanced at the

screen. Mentally I could see Charmion leaning back in her chair, smiling her slow fine smile, inquisitively waiting to see just how firm or how weak I could be. I was not inclined to be weak. There was something in the personality of this big domineering man which roused an imp of contradiction. We sat silent, eyeing one another across the room.

"I believe you and—er—Mrs. Fane are strangers to this neighbourhood?"

"Yes! That is so."

"You have no—er—special link or attraction?"

I saw the trap, and protested blandly.

"Oh, yes! We are delighted with Pastimes. It exactly suits our requirements."

Mr. Maplestone frowned, and fidgeted to and fro, then suddenly leant forward, straightening his face into what was obviously intended to be a smile.

"Miss Wastneys! Will you forgive me if I am perfectly frank and honest, and tell you exactly what is in my mind?"

"Of course I will. I am sure," I declared mendaciously, "there can be nothing to forgive!"

He had the grace to look a trifle ashamed, but his resolution did not waver. Not a bit! He looked straight in my eyes, and said deliberately:—

"I want Pastimes! For the moment it has slipped through my fingers, but a couple of hours cannot seriously affect your arrangements. On my

cousin's behalf I am anxious to take over the lease. It would be an act of grace on your part if you would agree to this arrangement, and deal with me as his representative!"

The audacity of it! For a moment I was silent for sheer want of breath, but I could feel the blood rushing into my cheeks, and knew that my eyes were sending out flashes to meet his own. My appearance must have prepared him for my answer before it came, uttered in a very calm, very haughty, aggravatingly deliberate tone.

"We are not in the habit of changing our plans in a couple of hours. Pastimes suits us. It is unnecessary to look for another house. The matter was decided this morning."

"You understand that my cousin is an invalid, and that he has a special reason for wishing to live in this neighbourhood?"

"There are other houses. Pastimes is not the only one that is vacant."

"It is the only one that is suitable," he repeated doggedly, and there followed a silence during which he sat back in his chair, staring at me with the light blue eyes, which of all eyes in the world can look at once the coldest and the most angry. If he could have done what he wanted at that moment, he would have taken me by the shoulders and shaken me well. To have made up his mind that a thing must be, and to find himself thwarted by a bit

of a girl—it was unsupportable!—so unsupportable, that even now he refused to believe it could be true. Giving himself a little shake, like a dog who rouses himself to fresh efforts, he again made that industrious attempt at a smile, and began slowly :—

“I am afraid I have made a bad beginning! Please forgive me if I have seemed discourteous. When we have talked things over quietly, I have no doubt that we shall be able to reach a satisfactory agreement.”

“I’m afraid I can’t see how that can be! There is only one Pastimes, so one of us is bound to be disappointed!”

He pounced on that as if scenting a hopeful weakness.

“Exactly. Yes; but the disappointment would vary in intensity. That is what I am anxious to point out. When Edwards told me that the tenant was a lady I felt reassured, for it is a matter in which a woman’s kindliness and good heart——”

My eyes roved to the screen. Charmion’s ears were assuredly open at this moment, straining to hear my reply. I raised my eyebrows, and said frostily :—

“We are speaking of a business arrangement. I am afraid that is the only light in which we can consider the matter. We shall honourably fulfil our part of the agreement which we have signed.”

“You refuse to show any consideration for an invalid returning home—after many years?”

“Not at all. If it is ever in our power, as neighbours, to show him any kindness, we shall be eager to do all that is possible—short of giving up our own house for his benefit. Would you do it yourself, Mr. Maplestone—for the sake of a stranger you had never seen?”

He stood staring at me, his cheeks bulging with the moving lumps which show that people are swallowing down words which they dare not allow themselves to say. With the same air of elaborate patience which he had shown before, he explained slowly:—

“My cousin has been stationed in India. In a border regiment. He has served his country for thirty years. Now he has had a paralytic stroke, and is making his way home by slow stages. A man who has worked and suffered as he has done deserves a home, and the gratitude of his fellow-countrymen.”

“There are two sides to every question, Mr. Maplestone. If I chose to go into details, I might convince you that Mrs. Fane and I have our own claims, which seem to us equally strong.”

He leapt from his seat, and advanced until he stood directly facing my chair.

“That finishes it! It is no use appealing to your feelings. Let us make it pure business then! I

offer you a hundred pounds down for the reversion of the lease!"

So it had come to this. Bribery undisguised! I lowered my eyelids, and sat silent, an image of outraged dignity.

"You refuse! It is not enough? Two hundred then! Three!"

Still silence. But my listening ears caught a threatening rustle behind the screen.

"Three hundred! It is a good offer. You are not bound to this neighbourhood. You can find other houses to suit you. Still not enough? Name your own terms then. How much will you take?"

"A million pounds!"

The words leapt out of my mouth as it seemed of their own volition. I was tired of this farcical bargaining, and determined to put an end to it, once for all. I stood up and faced his blank stare of amazement, without at least any outward shrinking.

"Surely it is useless to prolong this bargaining. It is very unpleasant and humiliating."

Mr. Maplestone set his square jaw.

"You are only one partner to this transaction. Mrs. Fane is probably your senior. If I were to see her, she might be induced to name a more—er—shall I say reasonable (oh, the cutting sarcasm of that tone!) figure."

"*Two* millions."

The high clear tone struck across the room. Mr.

Maplestone wheeled round and beheld Charmion standing just outside the opening of the screen, one hand raised to rest lightly on the curved wood coping. She might have posed as a picture of graceful, imperturbed ease, so calm, so smiling, so absolutely unflurried and detached in both manner and bearing did she appear. Mr. Maplestone looked at her and—this was a curious thing—at one glance realised his defeat. All my efforts at dignity and firmness had failed to convince him, but behind Charmion's frail, essentially feminine exterior, those keen eyes had at once detected that strain of inflexibility which I was only slowly beginning to realise.

It was hopeless to bandy words. The Squire knew as much, and turned to the table to lift his hat and whip. He gave a short scornful laugh.

"The terms seem a trifle—high! I am afraid I must retire from the bidding. Pastimes is yours. I hope"—he looked from me to Charmion, and his expression was not pleasant to see—"I hope you may not have cause to repent your bargain!"

We bowed. He bowed. The door opened and shut. Charmion looked at me and shrugged her shoulders.

"A declaration of war! We have begun our campaign by quarrelling with the most 'influential gentleman in these parts!' Things are getting exciting, Evelyn!"

I did not speak. Reaction had set in, and I felt a pang of remorse. I did not want to quarrel with anyone, influential or uninfluential. I was sorry I had been ungracious. I felt a pang of sympathy for the poor, big, bad-tempered man riding homeward after his defeat.

I wondered when and how we should meet him again.

CHAPTER VI

HUNTING THE FLAT

LEAVING the workmen to carry out the necessary decorations at Pastimes, Charmion and I adjourned to London to buy carpets and curtains, and a score of necessary oddments. We found it a fascinating occupation, and grew more and more complimentary to each other as each day passed by.

“Charmion, you have exquisite taste! That’s just the shade I had chosen myself.”

“You have a perfect eye for colouring, Evelyn. I always know that your choice will be exactly my own.”

Sometimes we saw the humour of these self-satisfied compliments, sometimes we were so busy and engrossed that we accepted them open-mouthed. I suppose in every mind personal preference is magnified into the standard of perfection, and all the arguing in the world will fail to convince A that he is—artistically speaking—colour-blind, or B that her drawing-room is a bazaar of trumpery odds and ends! All the more reason to be thankful that

we agreed. We were convinced that our taste was unique; but supposing for one moment that it was bad, we should at least share a comfortable delusion!

The oak entrance hall was to be ornamented with old delft. The curtains and chair coverings were to be of the same shade of blue. The parquet floor was to be supplied with rugs of warm Eastern colours. Exactly the right shade of violet-purple had been found for the drawing-room, and I should be ashamed to say how many shops we ransacked for the chair coverings, until at last we found the identical pattern to satisfy our demands. Certainly I should be ashamed to confess what we paid for the piece. Charmion was appallingly extravagant! That was another discovery which I had made in the last days. It seemed as if she found a positive satisfaction in paying abnormal prices, not with the purse-proud bombast of the *nouveau riche*, but rather with the almost savage relief of a slave who shakes off a few links of a hated chain. I was a little alarmed at the total to which our purchases amounted; but I comforted myself with the thought, nothing new would be required for a long, long time, and that, if I found my income running short, I could always retire to my flat, and live on a figurative twopence under Bridget's clever management.

Charmion had heard all about the flat by this time, and had hurt my feelings by treating the

whole proposal as a ridiculous joke. She made no attempt to dissuade me—had we not agreed never to interfere in each other's doings? — but she laughed, and said, "Dear goose," and arched her fine brows expressively as she asked how long a lease I proposed to take, "Or, rather, I should say, how *short*?"

Now I had myself inclined to a short lease with the option of staying on, but opposition stiffened my back, and I there and then decided to go and look at several possibilities which I had hitherto put aside as impracticable because they had to be taken for a term of three to five years. Bridget would go with me—dear, lawless, laughter-loving Bridget, who entered into the play with refreshing zest. Bridget had the real characteristic Irish faculty of looking upon life as an amusing game, and the more novel and unorthodox the game was, the better she was pleased. "Sure it's your own face! It's for you to do what you please with it!" was the easy comment with which she accepted my proposed disguise. She undertook to do most of the work of the flat without a qualm, and shed an easy tear of emotion over the sorrows and difficulties which it was to be my mission to reduce.

"Oh, the poor creatures! Will they be starving around us, Miss Evelyn, and the little children crying out for bread?"

"N—not exactly that," I explained. "I want to

work among gentlefolk, Bridget—poor gentlefolk, who suffer most of all, because they are too proud to ask for help. But they will probably be short of time, and service, and probably of strength, too, and when I get to know them, they will let me help them in these ways, though they would not accept my money——”

Bridget looked sceptical.

“I wouldn’t put it past them!”

I laughed, and dropped the subject.

“Oh, well, time will show. Meantime you understand, don’t you, Bridget, that they are not *cheerful* places that we are going to see? Cheerful positions in London mean big rents, and I mean to live among people who have to count every penny several times over, and try hard to make it into a sixpenny bit. You and I will have sunshine and light at Pastimes—you won’t mind putting up with dullness for part of the year?”

“What would be the good of minding? You’d go, whether or not, now you’d got your head set!” returned Bridget bluntly. She added after a pause, “And besides, we’ll be getting our own way. I’m thinking we shall be glad of the change. It’s not as much as a thought of your own will be left to you, with Mrs. Fane by your side.”

“You are entirely wrong, Bridget, and it is not your place to make remarks about Mrs. Fane. Please don’t let me hear you do it again.”

"Yes, ma'am," murmured Bridget, turning instantly from a friend into an automaton, as was her custom on the rare occasions when I hardened myself to find fault. The words were submissive enough, but her manner announced that she had said her say, and would stick to it, though Herself, poor thing, must be humoured when she took the high horse. As usual, I retired from the conflict with a consciousness of coming off second best!

The next day I told Charmion that I was "engaged," and true to our delightful agreement, she asked no questions, but quietly disappeared into space. Then, with a ponderous feeling of running the blockade, I put on wig and spectacles and the venerable costume which had been provided for the occasion. Appropriately enough, it had originally belonged to an aunt—Aunt Eliza, to wit—who had handed it to me in its mellowed age, to be bequeathed to one of my many *protégées*. It was brown in colour—I detest brown, and it cordially detests me in return—and by way of further offence the material was roughened and displayed a mottled check. The cut was that of a country tailor, the coat accentuating the curve of Aunt Eliza's back, while the skirt showed a persistent tendency to sag at the back. When I fastened the last button of the horror and surveyed myself in the glass, I chuckled sardonically at the remembrance of heroines of fiction whose exquisite grace of out-

line refused to be concealed by the roughest of country garments. Certainly *my* grace did not survive the ordeal. What good looks I possessed suffered a serious eclipse even before wig and spectacles went on, and as acrowning horror, a venerable "boatshaped" hat (another relic of Aunt Eliza) and a draggled chenille veil.

Bridget was hysterical with enjoyment over the whole abject effect, but I descended the stairs and passed through the great hall of the hotel with a miserable feeling of running the blockade. Suppose I met anyone! Suppose anyone *knew* me! Suppose—I flushed miserably at the thought—Charmion herself was discovered sitting in the hall, and raised her lorgnon to quiz me as I passed by!

I need not have troubled. Not a soul blinked an eye in my direction. If by chance a wandering glance met mine, it stared past and through me as though I were impalpable as a ghost. My disguise was a success in one important respect at least—there was no longer anything conspicuous about me; I was just a humble member of society, one of the throng of dun-coloured, ordinary-looking females, who may be seen by the thousand in every thoroughfare in the land, but who, as a matter of fact, are not seen at all, because no one troubles to look. By Bridget's side I passed through the streets of London as through a desert waste.

Half an hour's journey by tube brought us to the first of the flats on my list. It was also the first specimen of its kind which Irish Bridget had ever seen, and the shock was severe. I found myself in the painful position of expecting "a decent body" to live in a kitchen two yards square, with a coal "shed" under the table on which she was supposed to cook, and to sleep in a cupboard, screened in merciful darkness, since, when the electric light was turned on, the vista seen through the grimy panes was so illimitably depressing that one's only longing was to turn it off forthwith!

"Preserve us! Indeed, if it was to die in it we were trying, it would be easy enough, but I'm thinking we'd make a poor show of living, Miss Evelyn! And used to the best as we are, too," said poor Bridget dolefully.

I sprang a good ten pounds in rent at the sound of her pitiful voice, and ran my pencil through every address below that figure.

Ten separate flats did we visit in the course of that day, and it was a proof of what Aunt Emmeline would call my stubbornness that I came through the ordeal without wavering. Regardless of Bridget's appealing eyes, I led the way forward, always affecting a buoyant hope that our next visit would be successful, while mentally I was holding a Jekyll and Hyde argument with my inner self, as follows:—

"Impossible to live in such warrens!"

"*Other people* manage to live in them all the year round!"

"But, as Bridget says, I have been used to the best."

"Quite time, then, that you take your share of the worst!"

"My health might suffer——"

"You have a good chance to recruit."

"I might lose my looks——"

"Disagreeable—but the world would go on, even if you did. Incidentally, you might improve the looks of other women!"

"It would be awfully dull!"

"At first—yes! Not when you get into stride. Helping other people is the most exhilarating of tonics."

"I have never lived in a town. I should feel cramped, prisoned, stifled for air."

"But think how you would feel when the day came to return to Pastimes! Wouldn't that first hour in the garden be glorious enough to repay you for all the exile?"

Bridget's wheedling voice broke in on my argument:—

"Miss Evelyn, dear, I've been thinking—wouldn't it be a duty-like, to be having a bit of sun? Seems like we could wrestle along a bit better if we faced the right way!"

Poor dear ! Above all the drawbacks, it was the darkness of the interiors of those small flats which most perplexed the good countrywoman : the passages lighted only through the ground glass panels of bedroom doors ; the windows shadowed by walls of other buildings, which towered up at but a few yards' distance ; the kitchens staring blankly into a "well," ornamented with the suggestive spirals of a fire-escape.

"If we could maybe face somewhere where there was a bit of green !" pleaded the eloquent Irish voice. "Sure the leddies and gentlemen you are meaning to help—you'll be more likely to find them in the place you'd choose yourself, if you were settling in earnest ?" Bridget rolled an eye at blocks E, F, and G of a colossal pile of buildings which stretched their inky length over the two blocks of a narrow thoroughfare. "Cast your eye over them window curtains !" said she scathingly. "Ye can tell what's inside without troubling to look. A dirty, idle set that will sponge on you, and laugh behind your back !"

I looked, and shuddered, and was thankfully convinced. In my efforts not to aim too high, my standard had fallen impossibly low, and Bridget's keen common sense had been right in prophesying that I was more likely to find a congenial type of people in a neighbourhood which appealed to my own taste.

No sooner said than done! I escorted Bridget to a restaurant, and fed her and myself with lots of good hot food, and then straightway hired a taxi, and drove back to the agents to demand addresses of flats a little further afield, which should have at least a modicum of light and air.

It appeared that I had demanded the thing above all others for which tens of thousands of other women were already clamouring!

"Everybody wants a cheap flat in an open and airy situation. For one that is to let we have a hundred applicants. Of course, if you are prepared to pay a long price——"

"But I am not."

"Quite so. Otherwise I have some fine sites in Campden Hill. Lift. Central heating. Every convenience."

"Seventy pounds is the utmost——"

"Quite so. Then we must rule out Campden Hill, or Hampstead, or Kensington." The agent switched over the leaves of his book, ran his finger down a list, and hesitated, frowning. "There is *one* vacancy which might suit—a small block of flats on the borders of Hammersmith. The postal address is Kensington. I don't know if you are particular as to address?"

"Not a bit."

"Ah!" The agent evidently thought small beer of me for the admission. "Most ladies are. In this

case we can ask an extra five pounds a year because of the Kensington address, and the class of tenants is much better than in the adjoining blocks a few hundred yards off, where the postal address is Hammersmith."

Bridget coughed in an impressive fashion which was intended to say, "Better class! Hark to that now! That's the place for us!" As for me, I was torn between amusement at the rank snobbery of it all, and a tender pity for the pathos that lay behind! Poor strugglers, clinging on to the fringe of society, squeezing out the extra pounds so badly needed for necessities, for—what? The satisfaction of seeing a certain word written on an envelope, or of impressing a shop assistant with its sound. In some cases no doubt there were deeper reasons than snobbishness, and it was thought of them which supplied the pathos. Some careworn men and women had weighed that extra rent in the balance, and had considered that it was "worth while," since a good address might prove an asset in the difficult fight for existence, or perchance some loved one far away had vicariously suffered in past privations, and might be deluded into believing in a false prosperity by the high-sounding address. My ready imagination pictured the image of an invalid mother contentedly informing her neighbours: "My daughter has moved to Kensington. Yes! Such a charming neighbourhood. The gardens, you know. *And*

the royal palace!" Five pounds a year might be worthily expended on such a gain as this!

Well, there seemed nothing for it but to prospect Weltham Mansions at once, so we chartered yet another taxi, and hurried off without delay to have daylight for our inspection. We drove for miles, through streets at first wide and handsome, then growing ever dingier and more "decayed". Is there anything in the world more depressing than a third-rate English suburb? I can imagine being poor contentedly in almost every other land—in India, for instance, I know of impecunious couples who have lived in two tents beneath two mango trees with comfort and enjoyment, but it takes a super Mark Tapley to enjoy poverty in London!

We had left the gardens a long way behind before at long last we reached a block of dull red buildings, the various doorways of which were decorated with different letters and numbers. A 1 to 40—C 41 to 80—D 81 to 120—etc., etc. The windows were flat, giving a prison-like effect to the exterior, and I was just saying devoutly to myself, "Thank goodness, *that's* not——" when the taxi stopped, and my eyes caught the fateful letters carved on a dull grey stone!

It *was* Weltham Mansions, and there were two flats to be let. The porter produced the keys and led us up, up, endless flights of stairs to a crow's nest near the roof, and then down, down again to what was described as the "sub-basement," which,

being interpreted, meant that the level of the rooms was a few feet beneath that of the road. Now I had always set my affections on a basement flat, chiefly—let me confess—because the sound of it appealed to my ears as so suitable and appropriate to my new rôle. Also, to be able to walk in and out, without mounting the stairs, minimised the risk of discovery, which was no light point under the circumstances, but it was a distinct surprise to find that the flat itself appealed to me more than any which I had yet seen. Why? Not because of the rooms themselves, for they were ordinary and prosaic enough, but because the bank which sloped from the floor of the area to the street railings was of *grass*, closely-growing, well-conditioned grass, broken here and there by tiny, sprouting leaves of—yes! extraordinary as it seems, there could be no doubt about it, for both Bridget and I recognised them in one lightning glance—*primroses*! Some former tenant who loved the country had planted those roots in a hopeful mood, and they had taken hold, and grown, and multiplied. When spring came the owner of that basement flat would have a primrose bank between herself and the world outside those high railings. She had also a strip of cement area in which she could place tubs filled with soil which would provide blossom for later days. The exposure was south, and the railings were high, so that the tiny garden would be assured of sun and security. The soot

would fall, and the dust lie thick, but there would be colour and life, and on the air faint wafts of perfume.

We went back to the porter's room to hear the particulars of the lease, and on my way I stopped to read the list of names printed on little slides on a mahogany board. There were forty in all, and they were as illuminating as such names usually are, when suddenly, three parts down the list, I came upon one which made my heart leap into my mouth. I stood reading the few words over and over, actually *spelling* the letters in my incredulous surprise, but there it was ; there was no doubt about it—the words plainly printed for every one to see—

“No. 32. Mr. Wenham Thorold.”

Well, talk about fate ! There are some circumstances under which one realises at once that it is useless to struggle. This was one ! I turned to the porter with an air of resignation.

“I will take the flat. Please prepare the necessary papers, and send them to me to sign.” Then I gave him my new name. After due deliberation I had determined to be “Miss Mary Harding,” as Wastneys is unusual, and might draw undesirable attention. Miss Mary Harding, of a basement flat !

CHAPTER VII

HOSTILITIES ?

OUR removal into Pastimes—like every other removal since the time when man began to live beneath a roof—took far longer than we expected. I went back to Ireland to gather my possessions, and say good-bye, and Charmion stayed in London to hurry up tradesmen, and make uninteresting purchases of pots and pans, and dusters and door scrapers, and the other needfuls which every house must have, but which are so dull to buy.

When I joined her in the hotel, I found her in a state of haughty displeasure over the extraordinary delay which was attending the work at Pastimes itself. In another person this state of mind would have found vent in “fuming,” but Charmion never fumed. She folded her hands, and drooped her white lids, and drawled in a tone of incredulous disgust:—

“I can’t understand it. I *told* them to be quick. I expressly stipulated that they were not to potter.”

“Apparently they are not even ‘pottering’!

They have not begun at all!" I said grimly, as I ran my eye down the letter just received from the "man in charge". It was the ordinary, ultra-polite, ultra-servile production of the tradesman who has *not* kept his word.

"DEAR MADAM,—Owing to a press of other work, I regret that I have not been able to commence——"

"Commence! Odious word. It is adding insult to injury to use it. And what can he mean? He seemed so keen about the order. Said he was so slack that he would be able to put on all his hands!"

"I shall write and tell him to do so at once," said Charmion magnificently, and I held my peace and let her do it, knowing that it would be no use to object, and hoping that at least her letter might succeed in extracting some more definite information.

It did! This was it:—

"MADAM,—I beg to inform you that Mr. Maplestone having rented the house known as 'Uplands,' on behalf of General Underwood, and placed urgent orders with us for its re-decoration, we are regretfully compelled to delay operations at Pastimes for some weeks. We are making all possible speed with the present contract, and beg to assure you that your work shall then be finished with all despatch.

"We have the honour to remain, etc."

Charmion and I looked at one another, and looked, and looked, and looked. We were both thinking hard—thinking backward, thinking ahead. Exactly what we thought neither of us put into words ; we just sat silently and stared, until presently Charmion rose, marched over to her writing-table, and scribbled a few words on a telegram form. Then she held it out for me to read :—

“Order for decorations at Pastimes cancelled herewith.”

“Do you approve ? ”

“Er—oh, yes, of course—I suppose so. But how shall we——”

“That’s easily arranged. Any town firm will be glad of the order. It will be more expensive, but will probably be better done. In any case we have no choice.”

“It’s such a tiny village. Where could the men sleep ? ”

“I haven’t the slightest idea. That is their business, not mine. We shan’t have any difficulty about that,” Charmion declared, and she was right, for the West End firm who received our instructions waved aside the question with smiling assurance. They were accustomed to sending workmen all over the country. To the loneliest places. All could be easily arranged. We were left with the impression that if it had been our pleasure to pitch our tent in the Sahara, the frock-coated manager would have

executed our wishes with equal ease. So far, so good ; but as we left the shop Charmion turned to me, and said darkly :—

“I think, under the circumstances, it might be wise to change our minds about employing country maids, and to engage London ones instead.”

“You are afraid——”

“I am afraid of nothing, but I think it probable that the local girls who wrote to us about situations may now be ‘urgently’ bespoken for service at Uplands.”

“Well, he will need servants,” I said feebly, and fell to thinking of Uplands itself, and of how unfortunate it seemed that General Underwood should be settling so near ourselves. We had noticed the house, indeed, we could not fail to do so, as it lay a quarter of a mile along the high road from Pastimes, on the direct route from Escott, which was Mr. Maplestone’s village. It was a handsome-looking house, but painfully prosaic, built of grey stone, unsoftened by creepers, and showing a row of windows flat and narrow, and extraordinarily high. One could just imagine the rooms, like so many boxes, and the hall flag-tiled, and the house full of draughts, for the windows of the principal living-rooms faced perversely towards the north. I hoped the poor General would instal a heating system and a generous supply of rugs ; but what chiefly concerned me at the moment was

the thought that every time—every single time—that cross, red-headed man came over to visit his relative, he must pass our door!

My imagination immediately conjured up half a dozen irritating encounters. Evelyn returning home on a wet day, bedraggled, *not* at her best, toiling along the wet lane, and being splashed with mud by the wheels of a gaint car, from the cushioned seat of which the Squire and his wife regarded her with lofty disdain. There *was* a Mrs. Maplestone, and I had drawn a mental picture of her, which I felt sure was true to life. Small, meek, rather pretty, with big brown eyes which held a chronic expression of being rather frightened by what had just gone before, and exceedingly anxious as to what should come next. She would probably wear handsome furs, and a hat three seasons old.

Encounter number two represented Evelyn in her best hat and coat, feeling rather spry and pleased with herself, until presently, clinketty clank, round the bend of the road came the quick, staccato beat of horses' hoofs. Mr. and Mrs. Maplestone cantering past in hunting kit, which at one glimpse killed complacency and substituted disgust for the poor fripperies of town.

Encounter number three was most obnoxious of all. It represented Evelyn *solus* encountering Mr. Maplestone *solus* and on foot. Approaching him

on the unsheltered road, torn by the problem, "Will he bow? Shall I bow? Will he pretend? Shall I pretend?" moving nearer and nearer, and in a final moment of discomfort meeting the stare of blank, angry eyes. Poor man! It must be exhausting to have such a violent temper. I wondered what he looked like when by chance he was happy and pleased!

The West End firm got through their work in record time, and at the end of three weeks Charmion and I took possession, and set to work at the task of putting our house in order. Every woman delights in this work in *prospect*; in reality, every one comes full tilt against a score of irritating, aggravating *contretemps* which baulk her carefully-laid schemes.

Our *contretemps* appeared in a very usual form. The cook and gardener, who had been definitely engaged to meet us on our arrival, and whom we had, therefore, not replaced in town, sent missives instead, to "hope they didn't inconvenience, but they had changed their minds". The two town servants who *had* arrived were immediately plunged into woe, and, looking into their set, dour faces, one could *hear* the inward thought, "Don't believe anyone ever *was* engaged! Just one of their tricks to get us down here to do the work alone." We left them sitting like monuments of woe in the

kitchen, and shut ourselves up in the drawing-room to consult.

“Uplands, I conclude,” said Charmion coldly.

“Oh, no! I don’t believe it. He wouldn’t condescend to *that*!”

“Why not? He stopped the work in the house.”

“That was different! After all, he *is* the Squire, and when it was a case of inconveniencing him, or a stranger—a local tradesman could hardly be expected to put us first. At least, you can *understand* his position.”

“Does the same argument apply to local domestics?”

“It might do; but I don’t believe it was used. To give a tradesman an order for now or never, and to—to stoop to bribe a servant to break an engagement—surely they are two different things! I do *not* believe Mr. Maplestone would do it!”

“Well!—we shall see. In the meantime, what about dinner?”

I went back to the kitchen and talked to the Londoners, smiling radiantly the while. I said it was upsetting, but we must expect upsets. No one ever settled into a new house without one. I said there would be no difficulty in getting another cook—we would telegraph for one to-morrow; in the meantime we would just picnic, and do the best we could. I looked from one sulky face to another, and asked confidently:—

"Now, which of you is the better cook?"

The parlour-maid said she was a parlour-maid. She had never been *asked* to cook. She could make tea.

I said, "Thank you!" and turned to the housemaid.

The housemaid said she was a housemaid, and didn't understand stoves. She had always lived where kitchen-maids were kept.

I said calmly, "Oh, well, it's fortunate that I am a woman, and can cook for the lot of you until help comes. Perhaps you will kindly bring tea into the hall, and then get your own as quickly as possible. I shall require the kitchen by six o'clock."

They were horribly discomposed, and I left them murmuring vaguely in protest, very pleased with myself and my fine womanly attitude, though at the bottom of my heart I knew quite well that Bridget would come to the rescue, and never a saucepan should I be allowed to touch.

As a matter of fact the good soul descended on the slackers like a whirlwind, and the while she drove them before her, treated them to an eloquent lecture upon the future sufferings, privations, rebellions, and retaliations of the prospective husbands of females who had grown to woman's estate, and yet could not cook a meal. Through the green baize door I could hear the continuous torrent of invective, broken at first by protest, later

on by soft exclamations of surprise, and finally—oh, the relief of that moment!—by an uncontrollable explosion of laughter. The Cockney mind is keenly alive to humour, and when a racy Irishwoman gets fairly started on a favourite subject, the delicious contradictions of her denunciations are hard to beat! That laughter saved the situation, and the domestic wheels began to move.

Charmion wrote to an emergency lady in town. I didn't see the letter, but I diagnosed its tone. Peremptory and—lavish! Wages no object, but speed essential, or words to that effect. Anyway, in two days' time a married couple arrived, were pleased to approve of us, and settled down with the air of coming to stay. She was an excellent cook, and he seemed a rather indifferent gardener, which just suited our views. If gardeners are experts they want their own way, insist on bedding-out, carpet-beds, and similar atrocities. We meant to run our garden on different lines!

Hurrah! I am so relieved. The truants have *not* gone to Uplands. I met the cook in the village to-day, recognised her, and tackled her to her face. She flushed and wriggled, looked uncomfortable, but not as penitent as I should have liked to have seen.

"Was it necessary to wait until we had actually arrived, before letting us know that you had changed your mind?"

She stood on one foot, and drew circles on the road with the other.

"Didn't decide myself till just the last minute."

"You hadn't taken another place then? I understood from your note——"

"I'm staying on with my mother. I may go to a lady at Guildford."

Silence. One department of my brain felt an immense relief, the other an immense exasperation.

"Then you were free all the time! Doesn't it strike you as wrong and dishonourable to show such a want of concern for other people's convenience?"

She muttered. I caught the sound of a few words—"I'm not the Only One!" and put on my most dignified air.

"However, it is all for the best. You certainly would not have suited us. I hope for your own sake you will learn to keep your word."

I walked on, nose in the air, aggressively complacent in appearance, but those words rankled!

"*Not the only one!*" Now what did she mean by that? Obviously the insinuation was meant to go home, but how and where had we been to blame? Not in our treatment of the woman herself. We had offered good wages, and to pay for the time she had been kept waiting; yet something had happened which had made her willing to lose money and time, and that something was not

another place ! I felt puzzled, and, at the bottom of my heart, *worried* about it all !

Later on I paid my first visit to the little draper's shop, and ran the fire of a universal scrutiny from the staff. The "young ladies" knew who I was, and were devoured by curiosity, but it was not a friendly curiosity ! Instead of the eager smiles which usually greet a new customer, there was a pursed-up gravity, a stolid attention to business, which was decidedly blighting. At home in Ireland every tradesman was more or less a friend, and what they did not know of Kathie's affairs and mine was not worth hearing.

"Pastimes, I believe !" said the saleswoman with the pasty face, when I directed the parcel to be sent home. Was it fancy which read a note of reproach in her intonation ?

Coming home, I met General Underwood in a bath-chair, being pushed along by a man in livery. He has white hair and a yellow face. He looks tired and ill, and lonely and sad. I'm sure he hates the bath-chair, and fights horribly with his doctor, who insists on fresh air. He rolled his tired eyes at me as I passed, and said something in a low voice to his attendant. I was misguided enough to turn my head, and behold ! the Bath-chair was tilted round so that he might look after *me*. The man knew me by sight, and was laying bare the whole horrible truth.

“That’s her, sir! The lady from Pastimes!”

I felt ruffled, and went straight into my “sulky,” where I stayed till lunch-time. We had a delicious *soufflé*, and Charmion asked no questions, and went out of the way to be particularly sweet. I felt better every moment, and by the time coffee arrived had quite recovered my spirits.

If the General *had* lived in Pastimes, he would have had to use the bath-chair just the same, and his hair would have been quite as white! Pastimes could not have made him young! Charmion is right. I wear my heart on my sleeve. I must learn to be more callous and matter-of-fact!

CHAPTER VIII

THE VICARAGE CALLS

ON Sunday we went to the Parish Church. At breakfast, Charmion seemed silent and depressed; but, true to our agreement, I asked no questions, and she volunteered no explanation. She said she was not going to church, but later on she changed her mind. I think she saw that I was disappointed, and a trifle shy at going alone, so off we went together—Charmion a marvel of unobtrusive elegance in grey, and I “taking the eye” in sapphire-blue—along the breezy lane, past the closed gates of Uplands, through the shuttered High Street into the tiny square, in a corner of which the church was nooked, with the vicarage garden adjoining the churchyard.

The congregation was assembling from different parts, and everybody who passed stared at us, the men stolidly enough, the women with a curiosity which, to my mind at least, had something antagonistic in its nature. Their pursed lips, their side-long glances, reminded me of the assistants in the draper’s shop; of the cook who muttered that she

was not "the only one". I looked at Charmion to see if she felt the atmosphere, but her eyes held the blank, far-off expression which marked her dark hours. She had no attention to spare for village worthies: nothing that they could do or think was of sufficient importance to arouse her attention. Inside, the church was bare and uninteresting, and the musical service poor, but the Vicar himself attracted me greatly. A plain-looking man nearing forty, but with a most expressive and eloquent voice. He read the service exquisitely—so exquisitely, that words which one knew by heart seemed suddenly filled with new meaning. When the time came for the sermon I expected great things. It seemed to me that the man who could so wonderfully interpret the words of others, must be endued with the gift of eloquence for himself. I even braced myself for a mental effort, in case his argument should soar above my head. And then—a child could have followed him! It was absolutely the simplest, plainest, and most intimate address which I had ever heard from a church pulpit. Incidentally, it was also the shortest!

It was ten minutes to twelve o'clock when he folded his arms on top of the open Bible, and leant forward for a long, silent moment, looking earnestly from side to side into the upturned faces of his hearers. Then he began to talk—to *talk*, not to preach, speaking every word with an inflection of

the truest sincerity. The text was "Forgetting the things that are behind, I press towards the mark," and the "talk" ran pretty much like this:—

"How has this week gone with you, Brothers and Sisters? To some it has brought success, to others failure. Bad weather, bad temper, lost control, a host of tiny troubles have sprung upon us unprepared; have worked their will, and left us discouraged and weak. Thank God for beginnings! New years, new months, new weeks—after every twenty-four hours, a new day, with the sun rising over a new world! Last week is dead. All the grieving in the world cannot revive it into life. Bury it! Remember only the lessons it has taught. Forget the things that lie behind. *Press forward!* This week is alive. This week brings opportunity. Live! Work! Pray! With God's grace make it the best, the truest, the kindest week you have ever lived."

The clock struck twelve, and the sermon was over. A bare ten minutes, but if he had preached for an hour on end he could not have added to its effect. The congregation listened in tense silence, as though afraid of losing a word. One *felt* the electric thrill of hope and courage and high resolve which flooded their hearts; felt it oneself; went out from the church braced in heart and soul.

I want to know more of that man. He could help one along.

I have got my wish. He called with his wife this afternoon—the first callers since we arrived. They were shown into the drawing-room, where Charmion and I were lolling over our tea. There was fruit on the table, besides a selection of cakes from town, and as we had been gardening in the earlier part of the afternoon, and got thoroughly grubby and untidy, we had changed into the tea-gowns which we wear in the evening when we are too lazy to put on more elaborate clothes. They are very nice tea-gowns, and, though I say so who shouldn't, we look exceedingly nice in them, but to the eye of a hard-working country clergyman the whole interior may have looked *too* luxurious to be approved! His face looked very grave as he shook hands.

Mrs. Merrivale is a surprise. The Vicar figures on the church board as the Rev. John C. Merrivale, but she has her cards printed, "Mrs. J. Courtney Merrivale," and she calls him "Jacky" in public. She is very young—twenty-two or three at the most—and has a very long neck and a pretty little face, with huge pale-blue eyes, and a minute mouth with coral-pink lips. She is dressed in cheap clothes made in the latest fashion, and she asks questions all the time, and doesn't wait for an answer. When you tell her a definite fact, such as that you have been planting tulips in the garden, she says, "Not really!" or as a change, "Fancy!"

or "Just think!" *He adores her.* Every time he meets her eyes, his grave, strong face softens and glows in a way which makes one feel inclined to cry. Lonely women feel so *very* lonely at such moments as these! She contradicts him over the most futile things, and says, "No, Jacky, it was three o'clock, not four; I was just getting up from my rest," and he smiles, and doesn't mind a bit.

They had tea, but refused fruit, with an air of being rather outraged by the offer. Mrs. Merrivale surreptitiously studied the details of Charmion's tea-gown, and the Vicar and I laboured assiduously at conversation. I had liked him so much on Sunday, and had hoped he would be a real friend; but—things didn't go! I had a miserable feeling that he had paid the call as a matter of duty, that he disapproved of us, that he dreaded our influence on his precious little goose of a wife. There was certainly a restraint in his manner. *Everybody* seemed restrained in this funny little place. I wonder if it was something in the air!

Having made mental notes concerning the tea-gown, Mrs. Merrivale next turned her attention to the room, and stared around with frank curiosity and a barely concealed envy.

"Your room looks so pretty. Jacky, that's exactly the material I wanted for our curtains. You have beautiful china. I'm collecting, too; but"—she gave an expressive shrug. "Of course, this room

lends itself; it is so big, and get's *all* the sun. You remember, Jacky"—she looked at her husband with widened eyes—"Mr. Maplestone called it a 'Sun Trap'."

It seemed an innocent enough remark, but the Vicar's grave assent implied a deeper meaning. Mrs. Merrivale sighed, and elaborately lengthened her chin.

"Uplands is so *bleak*. General Underwood feels the cold so much. All the windows of the entertaining rooms seem to look the wrong way."

"He should have some more put in, facing the sun," Charmion suggested in her regal way, and Mrs. Merrivale looked as much aghast as if she had suggested pulling down the whole house and building it afresh. I burst hastily into the conversation.

"I think I met General Underwood the other day. In a bath-chair. I was glad that he was well enough to get out. I hope he will soon be quite well."

The Vicar said gravely:—

"He will never be well. The most that can be hoped is that he will not grow worse rapidly. He is a fine man, and has done good service. We are proud to have him back amongst us, but I am afraid, for his own sake, it has been a bad move. He ought to have settled in a kindlier climate."

"Yes, but——" Mrs. Merrivale began impulsively,

and pulled herself up, and bit her red lip. "Jacky," she said hurriedly, "I'm afraid we must go."

They went, and I felt a worm. It was plain to me now that the parish in general, from the Vicar downward, had absorbed the idea that the strange ladies at Pastimes had played a mean trick on their local hero, and were not inclined to smile upon the ladies in consequence. The Vicar had probably heard the Squire's prejudiced story direct, and from the Manor House and the Vicarage reports had percolated, as such reports *will* percolate, to the draper's assistants, and the man in the street, down and down to the truant cook herself.

Now the feudal feeling still lingers in English villages, and no self-respecting tenant chooses to range herself against the Squire. The cook's mother, no doubt, lived in a cottage owned by the Squire, and enjoyed perquisites of various sorts which she had no disposition to throw away. Beside the kitchen fire there had, no doubt, been a lengthy conference over that rumour, and the mother had said, "Don't you do it, Mary Jane. If the ladies are across with the Squire, how'll he take it if he hears my daughter's in their service? And half a dozen people with their eyes on this cottage as it is. A nice thing it would be for me if I got notice to quit!" The gardener's mother had probably presented the same argument to him, and the good people who had eyed us askance

on Sunday morning were probably reflecting to themselves, "They *look* all right, but you never know! There was evidently something *very* unpleasant about that lease. Poor General Underwood, too. Well, we won't be in a hurry to call. We will just wait and see!"

I felt horribly depressed, and somehow Charmion's utter indifference made me feel worse. I do love to be liked; it would poison me to live in an atmosphere of prejudice and suspicion, but she doesn't appear to care. I have a curious conviction that to be socially ostracised would be just what she would prefer. Books, the garden, my companionship—these would supply her need. New claims would be rather a bore.

I am not made like that. I need more. I feel horribly depressed.

Charmion saw it, and spoke out before we went to bed.

"You are worrying, Evelyn. That disagreeable autocrat has succeeded in prejudicing our neighbours against us, and it hurts you. Well, nothing is irrevocable. Say the word, and we will leave the house to-morrow, and put up a bill—to let!"

I jumped nearly out of my skin, with horror and amazement.

"Never! Not for the world. My pride wouldn't let me even if I wanted to do it, and I don't—I don't!"

I love the house and the life with you even more than I expected, it's only that I'm sorry about. I *do* like to live at peace with all men. Doesn't it worry you, Charmion, to feel yourself unjustly accused?"

"It would have done once. At your age. Since then"—her eyes took the blank, far-away look which always attended even the faintest allusion to the past—"since then I have lost the power of caring. When one has borne the one big hurt, the gnats have no power to sting."

I looked up eagerly, but she rose from her seat, pressing one hand gently over my eyes.

"No! Don't ask me! You have been very sweet, very forbearing. One great reason why my heart went out to you, Evelyn, was that you never questioned, never tried to probe. Go on being patient! Some day you shall know. I should like to tell you now, but I can't, I can't! You must wait. Some day the impulse will come, then it may be a relief. Till then, Evelyn, you must wait!"

CHAPTER IX

AN ENCOUNTER IN FORCE

IT is three months since we came to Pastimes, and until last week the days have slipped by happily and peacefully enough, but without any happenings worthy of record. We returned the Vicar's call, and were asked to tea to meet ourselves, when Mrs. Merrivale took the opportunity to ask me the address of my dressmaker! Two staid dames, who lived in small villa residences, left cards at the door, an attention which we duly returned in kind. The important people in the neighbourhood have left us severely alone, whirling past our gates to pay assiduous calls on General Underwood. He is the local hero, and we are the hard-hearted strangers who did *Something*—nobody knows precisely *what*—but *Something* mean, and underhand, and altogether unwomanly about a lease, and so forced the poor dear General to endure draughts and cold rooms, and seriously retarded his progress towards health!

It's no use pretending that I am not sorry about it, for I *am*; but all the same, they have been happy months. Charmion has seemed so much brighter

and more contented, and that itself means much to me, and we have been as happy as bees in our beloved garden, bullying our one man into preparing what he considers absolutely mad effects, and working with him to keep him up to the mark. We have flagged one path, and turfed over another, raised some beds, and sunk others, and contrived a really glorious hot-weather arbour, a good six yards in diameter, and open on three sides, to secure plenty of fresh air and an absence of flies.

Charmion has hardly gone out of the gate, except to church on Sundays, but I take a constitutional every day, and scour the country-side.

My first encounter with the Squire came off about the third week we were here, and my imaginings were wrong in all but two unimportant points. Mrs. Maplestone wears voluminous sables and clothes of antique cut; but they look quite charming and appropriate, for—she is antique herself!

She is the Squire's mother, not his wife. He hasn't got a wife; never has had one, and never will. Hates all women and their ways. Avoids feminine society, and has never been known to pay a girl five minutes' attention in his life! Such is the village verdict as repeated to me through Bridget, who has a *flair* for gossip, and is one of those wonderful people who cannot walk half a mile along a solitary country lane, without hearing, or seeing, or mentally

absorbing some interesting item about the lives of her fellow-creatures!

Every night when she brushes my hair she recounts these items to me, and I pretend to be uninterested, and listen with all my ears.

In any case, Mr. Maplestone seems very kind and attentive to his mother. I met them (as fancy painted!) when I was coming home from a trudge along the damp lanes, and was looking considerably blown and dishevelled. They were getting out of their car just outside the gates of Uplands—a most malapropos position!—but without the least hesitation he lifted his hat, and bowed, so that I was spared the troubled uncertainty which I had imagined.

I can't say he looked *amiable*, but at least he was polite, and I was so relieved that I bowed back with quite a broad smile. Mrs. Maplestone looked at me more in sorrow than in anger. I suppose she was thinking, "So young and so unkind!" An hour later, from an upstairs window, I saw the car whizzing homewards along the road. It did not stop at our gate. I rather wished it would.

After that we were constantly meeting. There seemed a fate in it. If I darted into the post office to buy a penny stamp, he was there buying tobacco. (You *do* buy tobacco in village post offices!) If I cut across fields and sat on a stile to rest, he came whistling from the opposite direction, and I had to

get up to let him pass. If in leaving the house I turned to the right, I met him advancing to the left. If I turned to the left, behold he was striding manfully to the right! Each meeting was the result of absolute chance, but Mistress Chance can play curious pranks at times, and it really seemed as though she was taking a mischievous delight in bringing about these unwished-for encounters. We always bow ceremoniously to each other; he always frowns, and I always smile. Theoretically I am annoyed and indignant; but at the critical moment the comical side of the situation sweeps over me, and out flashes the smile before I can force it back. It is so absurd to see a big grown man sulking like a child! Quite a good thing he does not intend to marry. His wife would have a nerve-racking time.

Well, as I said before, three months have passed by. Spring has turned into summer, and every day the garden brings fresh, delightful surprises. Uninteresting green sprouts burst into unexpected bloom; the rock garden is a blaze of purple and gold; blackened stems of creepers have disappeared beneath festoons of leaves and flowers.

Charmion and I wear muslin dresses, and eat our meals in the arbour, and lie in hammocks in the little orchard, and rejoice in every moment of the long sunshiny days. Down at the bottom of our hearts, I think we both have a feeling that this is just a little rest by the way. It won't last; we don't even wish

it to last. Life is too strenuous to pass in a summer garden; but we needed a rest and it is very, very good for a change. We pack boxes of flowers and send them to the hospitals, and every Saturday afternoon we invite parties of working girls from the nearest towns. They arrive in weird garments, very loud as to colour, and defeathered as to hats, and the village worthies look askance at them, shrug their shoulders, and think small beer of us for entertaining such odd guests.

For three months our lives have been indeed the "annals of a quiet neighbourhood," and then suddenly, last week, something happened!

I said suddenly—I might have said instantaneously, without any exaggeration. The position was this. Scene, a sloping roadway just outside the village area. The stage set with the three principal figures. Enter from left wing, General Underwood, reclining in his bath-chair, being taken for a short ride by his affectionate kinsman, Robert Maplestone. Enter from right wing, Evelyn Wastneys, bearing for home.' So far, so good. A similar encounter has happened many times before, but this time the sight of my white-robed figure seemed to upset the Squire's equanimity. He stopped the chair, and turned his head over his shoulder, looking backward over the road along which he had come. It afterwards transpired that the General's valet had been left behind to finish some small duty, and

was momentarily expected to follow. At that moment he did appear, and involuntarily Mr. Maplestone lifted his hands to wave an imperious summons.

I have said that the road is sloping; just at this point it is very sloping indeed, therefore the bath-chair darted forward, and spun downward with incredible speed. I have a kaleidoscopic picture in my brain which seems to consist of a lot of waving arms—the poor General's arms waving for help, the Squire's arms sawing the air as he raced in pursuit, further back in the road the valet's arms thrown to the sky in an agony of dismay, while down towards me, ever faster and faster, spun that runaway chair.

I had to stop it somehow! There was no one else to do it, so it was "up to me" to do my best. There was no time to be nervous, no time even to think. I stood braced in the middle of the road, and caught at the steering handle as it flashed by. My weight was light, and the General was heavy. I expected to have to hold hard, but what really happened was startling and unexpected, for the steering handle whirled straight round, struck me a severe blow on the arm, and—toppled me right over on to the foot of the chair! I sat down heavily on the General's feet, and the front wheel tore whirling streamers from the bottom of my skirt. The chair swayed, jerked, slackened its speed; two

strong hands stretched out and checked it still further; a second pair of hands gripped hold, and brought it to a stand.

Now came the moment when I ought to have been acclaimed, and overwhelmed with grateful acknowledgments as an heroic rescuer, who had risked her own life to save a feeble and suffering old man; but not at all! Quite the contrary! No sooner was his flight safely stopped than the General turned and roared at me with furious voice:—

“You sat on my *feet*! You are sitting on my *feet*!—I, with the gout! Get up! *Get up*!”

Then he turned to Mr. Maplestone, and roared at him:—

“What on earth did you *mean* by letting *go*?”

Then Mr. Maplestone turned to the valet, and roared at him:—

“Why the dickens couldn’t you *come*, instead of hanging about all day?”

Then they all turned on me, and chorused, “Get up! *Get up*!” and I tried to get up, and the caught streamers of my dress held me fast, and I sat down heavily again—*plop*, right on top of the poor gouty feet. The General roared more loudly than before, the two other men called out, “Oh, oh!” and I felt as if I should go into hysterics myself. It was a most lacerating scene.

Mr. Maplestone took out his penknife and hacked

at the ends of my skirt; the valet, who was the only calm and sensible one of the party, lifted me up, and supported me in his arms till I was set free. Then he let go suddenly, and I was so weak and giddy that I nearly fell down a third time. The General closed his eyes and emitted heart-rending groans, and the valet nipped hold of the handle of the chair and made for home as fast as he could go. I stood in the midst of my rags and tatters, and Mr. Maplestone stood by my side.

“I hope you are not hurt.”

“Oh, not at all!” I said bitterly. I was aching from head to foot. To judge from my sensations, my right arm was paralysed for life. In some mysterious way a wheel seemed to have passed over my feet, and my toes burned like fire. Perhaps they were broken—I could not tell. I had likewise several scrapes and a whole army of bruises, and the skirt of one of my nicest afternoon frocks was torn into ribbons. And not one word of thanks or appreciation. No wonder I was riled. “Oh, not at all. I *like* it! I am only sorry that I have contrived to hurt General Underwood. Perhaps you will kindly convey my apologies.”

He looked at me critically. Aches don't show on the surface, and I expect I looked rather red than pale. The only visible signs of damage were the ends of muslin and lace which strewed the road. He looked at them and said solemnly :—

"Your dress is spoiled! I'm afraid it was partly my fault. I had to get you free, and it was not a moment for deliberation. I'm sorry!"

He really *sounded* sorry, and that smoothed me down. I murmured that it didn't matter—only a muslin dress—not his fault, while he went on staring fixedly. Then at last he spoke, and what he said gave me an electric shock of surprise.

"It's a good thing," he said, "it wasn't the one with the frills!"

The one with the frills! For a moment my mind was a whirling void; I was too stupefied to think. Then gradually it dawned upon me that he must be alluding to a dress the skirt of which was composed entirely of tiers of flounces. It was a new and favourite possession, and I also was glad that it was spared. But—why should Mr. Maplestone——"

I gaped at him, and said:—

"*Why?*"

And he said lucidly:—

"Well, there would have been more to catch, wouldn't there? Besides——" He flushed, and lapsed into silence. Evidently it was inadvisable to continue the subject.

I gathered together my jagged ends, and turned to walk homeward, rather wondering what was going to happen when I began to move. I found I *could* walk, however, which proved that no bones were broken; but it was a halting performance, and

hurt more than I chose to show. If I limped *too* much, in common politeness Mr. Maplestone would be obliged to offer help. I had a vision of Charmion's face if she looked out of the window and beheld us walking arm in arm up the drive!

"Why do you smile?" cried the voice by my side. There was positive offence in the tone, and, as I looked my amazement, he continued accusingly, "You always smile. Every time we meet. It must be an annoyance to stumble against me wherever you go. Yet you smile! And to-day you are hurt, and you still smile!"

"I smile at my thoughts," I said grandiloquently. "And you are wrong, Mr. Maplestone. It doesn't annoy me at all. Why should it? You are as free to walk about as I am. I have no right to complain. And *my* conscience is clear! *I* have done nothing of which I have reason to be ashamed."

"You mean," he cried, "you mean that *I*——" Then his voice broke off sharply, and his forehead wrinkled in dismay. "*What's that? That mark on your arm. Blood?*"

He pointed. I looked, and sure enough a dull red patch was spreading over the muslin sleeve of my dress. The blow had evidently cut the skin, and this was the result. I felt dreadfully sorry for myself, and rather faint, and altogether considerably worse than I had done before, as a result of beholding these visible signs of injury. So, I was content to

see, did Mr. Maplestone himself. He really looked horribly worried and distressed, and kept glancing at me with anxious eyes, as if every moment he expected me to collapse.

But he never offered his arm! He came with me as far as the gate, and then held out his hand in farewell. It would have been churlish to refuse, so I put my own hand in his just for a moment.

"Don't shake it, please," I said. "It hurts." And then, because it *did* seem such an odd thing to say, I smiled again, a feeble watery smile.

He dropped my hand like a hot coal, and fled.

I limped into the house and told Charmion all about it, and cried quarts. I was mottled all over, black and blue.

CHAPTER X

MRS. MERRIVALE CONFESSES

NEXT morning a groom came over with kind inquiries from the Hall. Mr. and Mrs. Maplestone were anxious to hear if Miss Wastneys had recovered from the shock of yesterday. Miss Wastneys returned thanks for kind inquiries. She was suffering a good deal of pain, but her injuries were not serious.

Recovered, indeed! When I was a mass of bruises and aches, to say nothing of jumpy nerves. I was not inclined to make light of my injuries to Mr. Robert Maplestone.

Later on the General's valet made his appearance.

"General Underwood was anxious to hear how Miss Wastneys was this morning. He was distressed to hear that she had been hurt."

That was more tactful! Moreover, on receiving the bulletin, the man informed our maid that the old gentleman was rarely upset because he had been rude to the young lady. As soon as he was able he was coming in person to apologise.

Charmion listened quietly to the repetition of this

announcement. When the maid left the room, she turned to me as I lay on the sofa, being very sorry for myself, and lifted inquiring brows.

"Well, Evelyn. You know what this means?"

I did, or thought I did, but prevaricated, feeling self-conscious.

"What?"

"You have cut the knot with your heroic rescue! The Squire will call; the General will call; the neighbouring sheep will follow in their train. We shall be graciously 'forgiven' and admitted into the fold. Our quiet, sent-to-Coventry existence is at an end."

I looked at her anxiously. From voice and manner it was impossible to tell what she was really feeling. Above all things I wanted to please her. But still——

"Are you sorry, Charmion? Would you be sorry? I suppose they *will* come, but there is no necessity to receive them, if you would rather not. After ignoring us so long, they could not complain. I will leave it to you to decide."

"Then they shall come," she said firmly. "You've been a brick about it, dear, but I'm not blind. I know that it has been a trial for you to be cut off from general society. You are a sociable creature, and need friends around you. We have had a happy *tête-à-tête*, and I've enjoyed it thoroughly, but it couldn't go on. I should not have *allowed* it to go

on. I am a selfish woman in many ways, but not selfish enough to make a hermit of you at twenty-six. So!—let them all come. In any case, we shall probably be making a move before very long, so we can't be drawn very deeply into the rustic maelstrom!"

"We shall be making a move."

The words gave me a jar. My "Kensington" flat is now in order, and ready to receive my furniture whenever I care to send it in. I am still in love with the Pixie scheme; but, while summer lasts, and the garden grows more beautiful every day, I want to stay here! In my own mind I had settled down till September at least. I had believed that Charmion was as happy as myself, but now the old restlessness sounded in her voice. I looked at her, and saw her eyes staring wearily into space. Oh dear, oh dear, the narcotic of the new life is already losing its power; the grim spectre of the past is casting its shadow between us!

They have called! This afternoon, when we were having tea in the garden, General Underwood's bath-chair appeared suddenly on the scene. First came a crunching of gravel, and when we turned our heads to discover the cause, the front wheel was already turning the corner of the path, and the next moment there was the General smiling benevolently upon us, the valet pushing the handle, and walking

by his side the Squire himself, very red in the face and puckered about the brow, exactly like a naughty boy who is being dragged forward to say he is "sorry".

Fortunately there was no time to consider the situation. We shook hands, and found a chair for Mr. Maplestone, and ordered more tea, and discussed the weather in its various branches, all with the utmost propriety, until gradually the ice thawed. Charmion is a gracious hostess, and the General is as genial and simple in manner as most men who have spent their lives "east of the Suez". After five minutes in his society one understands why he is the idol of the neighbourhood. He looks ill, poor dear, but his blue eyes are still clear and alert, and he twinkles them at you in such a shrewd, kindly fashion.

Not a word did he say about the accident until tea was half over and I handed him some cake, when he looked full at me, and asked slyly :—

"How is the poor arm?"

"Progressing beautifully, thank you. *And*—the poor feet?"

"Ah," he said eloquently, "that was a moment! I am ashamed of my ingratitude; but, my dear young lady, if you could have felt——"

"I know," I said humbly. "Eight stone six. But I had no choice; and at the worst, it was not so bad as being spilt into the road."

"Indeed, yes. I am under the impression that I owe you a great deal. It is difficult to express——"

"Please don't!" I said hastily. "I could hardly have done less, but I could very easily have done it in a less clumsy way; and—it's so embarrassing to be thanked! Let us talk of something else. Would you care to see our garden? We have worked very hard at it all spring, and are so proud of our effects. We love showing people round!"

Then I suddenly remembered and blushed, and glanced guiltily at the Squire, to discover that he was doing exactly the same at me, and we all three got up in a hurry, and disputed who should push the bath-chair. The Squire did it, of course, and Charmion and I walked one on each side and played show-women, and the dear old man admired everything he saw, and asked for seeds in the autumn, and offered *us* seeds in return, and did everything nice and polite that nice polite people do do on garden visits.

As for the Squire, he kept on saying nothing.

Our tour ended at the gate, and when we said our final good-byes, General Underwood explained he was not up to calling, as he was often unable to go out, but that at any time, if we could spare half an hour to visit *him*, it would be doing a kindness to a lonely old man. "And will you allow me to wish you much happiness and prosperity in your beautiful home?"

Charmion thanked him with serene unconsciousness, and the Squire and I stared elaborately into space, so elaborately that on parting we made two separate dives before we succeeded in finding each other's hands. Then the valet came forward, and the little procession turned out of the gate.

"Charmion," I said solemnly, "I feel a worm. That dear, heroic old man! I wish we had let him have 'Pastimes' ten times over."

"Mistaken heroism, my dear. He can be still more heroic at 'Uplands'."

"Er—what do you think of—the other one?"

"Er—honestly, Evelyn, I don't think of him at all!"

Mrs. Maplestone has called, and the three or four other county magnates, none of them particularly interesting from our point of view. We are now formally and definitely "received," and the first result has been a violent increase of intimacy on the part of the Vicar's wife. I think she has always "hankered" to know us, but not having enough individuality to act for herself, she has waited for a lead before taking the plunge.

Now it appears that she is organising a garden fête and wants us to help. It is her own idea, and she says it is for the organ fund. I don't want to be uncharitable, but I think it is equally designed for the amusement and diversion of Delphine

Merrivale! I am uneasy about that girl. Nature never designed her for a clergyman's wife; she is restless and bored, while that dear, good, fine man, who loves her so much, is as blind as a bat, and believes that all is well. To-day she sent for me to come to tea, and he came into the room while she was volubly discussing various plans, which struck me as likely to cost more money than they were ever likely to gain. When he appeared she gave a little shrug of impatience, and for a few moments lapsed into silence, but her self-control being soon exhausted, she took up her tale and babbled on as enthusiastically as before.

It appears that every summer a "Sale" is held in the vicarage garden to dispose of the articles manufactured by the "Working Party" throughout the winter session. They consist of serviceable garments for the poor, which are eagerly purchased by the members of the Needlework Guild, and also of a selection of "fancy" articles which *no-body* wants, such as brush and comb bags of pink and white crochet, shaving paper cases with embroidered backs (first catch the man who uses them!) and handkerchief sachets of white satin, on which are painted (badly) sprays of wild roses and maidenhair fern!

The parish has always meekly assembled itself together for the fray, paid threepence for a plain tea, and departed peacefully on its way; but this year

—*this* year, there is to be a band, and a man to cut out silhouettes, and ices, and strawberries and cream, and quite a variety of excitements.

“A treasure hunt for one, at an entrance fee of a shilling a head. The treasures to be supplied as voluntary offerings by the ladies of the neighbourhood.”

Mrs. Merrivale paused and cocked an interrogative eye at me, and her husband said gently :—

“Dear, aren’t you too ambitious? Our ordinary quiet sale has done very well until now. Why land yourself with a great deal of extra work and fatigue, to say nothing of expense, for an altogether problematical result!”

“Oh, Jacky,” she cried deeply. “It is not problematical. We shall make pounds and pounds. I don’t mind the work. I like it. Think how lovely it would be if we could clear off the whole debt!”

He smiled at her with the tenderest appreciation. Oh, if any man looked at me like that, I would work my fingers to the bone to help him. Honestly and truly, he believed that she was bracing herself to the fray out of the purest, most disinterested motives. Never for one moment did it occur to him that a grown woman could hanker after such ploys for her own amusement. There is much in his unconsciousness which is beautiful, but—there is danger, too! Surely, surely when two people live

together in such a terribly close relationship as husband and wife, before all things it must be necessary to understand!

"Then I leave it to you, dearest," he said. "Arrange as you think best. And now, if Miss Wastneys will excuse me, I must say good-bye. Poor Mrs. Evans is worse this afternoon. They fear that an operation may be necessary. She has had terrible pain."

Mrs. Merrivale threw out her hand impulsively. I was amazed to see that she had grown quite white.

"Don't, Jacky—don't! You know I can't bear it. *Why* will you speak of such things when I have begged you not?"

"I'm sorry, darling. I forgot. My mind was so engrossed." He laid his hand on her shoulder as he passed, and said to me, in an apologetic voice, "This poor child is so sensitive. The pain of the world wounds her tender heart. I am inconsiderate in bringing my burdens to her."

The door shut behind him, and we stared at one another for a long tense moment. I *knew*, and she knew that I knew, and suddenly the long strain of pretending to be what she was not reached the snapping point, and she spoke out in a burst of impotent irritation:—

"It's not true! I'm *not* tender-hearted. They don't wound me at all, all these sordid miserable

details ; they just irritate and disgust and asphyxiate. Oh, I'm so tired of it all—so *tired* —and he doesn't see, doesn't understand ! He puts me on a pedestal, and burns incense at my feet, and believes that I am as interested as himself, and all the time—all the time I am smothered with boredom and impatience. I don't know why I am saying all this to you. Yes, I do. I saw in your eyes that you saw through me, and knew what I really felt. Now I suppose you are horribly shocked ? ”

“ Not a bit. I don't understand enough to judge you one way or another ; but I wish, as you have begun, you would tell me a little more. I'm young myself, you see, so I should probably understand. Lots of people tell me their secrets, and I'm always sorry, and very rarely shocked. We all have our own faults. Why should we be so very hard on other people because theirs are a different brand from our own ? ”

She stared at me with her big blue eyes.

“ What are your faults ? ”

“ Well,” I laughed, “ the list would take a long time ! Shall we leave it for another day ? What I want to know now is, why, with your temperament, did you come to marry a country parson ? ”

“ Because I loved him, of course,” came the ready reply. “ He came to take duty in our church while our own clergyman was ill, and he stayed in our house. He was so much older than I—fifteen years

—that I never thought of him—like that! I just thought he was a dear, and liked to talk to him, and show him about the garden, and get him to help me in little odd ways. He was so learned and serious and staid that all the others were in awe of him, but I ordered him about, and made him wait on me, and teased him because he did it so badly. It was such fun! I enjoyed myself frightfully. Mother read me a long lecture one night, and said Mr. Merrivale would be pained to see father's daughter was such a frivolous girl. But he wasn't. He fell in love with me instead. Doesn't that seem queer?"

I didn't think it was queer at all. Imagination conjured up scenes in the summer garden where the gay pretty girl had held her little court, and queened it over the grave, silent man. It was a thousand to one on his falling under the spell. The mischief of it was that he had expected the marriage ceremony to convert a butterfly into a staid, parochial wife. John Courtney Merrivale had a thousand virtues, but imagination was not his strong point.

"I think it was extremely natural. Just what I should have expected to happen. You are very pretty, you know, and I expect you made a charming task-mistress. And, of course, any sane girl must have been interested in him. But—what did you think about the life in this little place?"

"Oh! I didn't think about it at all," she said calmly. "I was so happy, and—excited. And so busy getting my clothes, and the presents, and arranging for the wedding. I had a lovely wedding. Eight bridesmaids carrying rose-staves. And Jacky took me to Switzerland for the honeymoon, and was so young and gay himself. Like a boy. I had a perfectly glorious three months, and then——"

She paused, and the pink and white face puckered into a grimace as she cast an expressive glance to right and left.

"We came *home*! That was the first shock, seeing all this dingy, hideous furniture, and realising that it had to stay. Jacky likes it because it belonged to his mother, and he thinks it would be wicked waste to sell it for nothing, and buy new. I tried to brighten things up, but—if you look round this room you will realise that a few new things made the effect *worse*! I gave it up in despair, and all my pretty cushions and embroideries, and pictures and ornaments are hidden away in boxes in the attic."

"Oh, that's hard! You have my unbounded sympathy. I should hate to live in uncongenial surroundings. Isn't there *any* room in the house you could have for your own, and furnish just exactly as you like?"

"All the rooms are full. I've given up trying to

change things *now*, but they irritate me all the same. When I've been out all the day at meetings and guilds, it would be a rest to come home to a pretty room. I look at those maroon curtains, and this hideous patterny carpet, and feel all nervy and on edge; then Jacky thinks I am tired, and brings me hot milk." She opened her speedwell blue eyes to their fullest width, and stared at me dolefully. "Oh, Miss Wastneys, it is so strenuous to have to live up to an ideal!"

"It would be still more strenuous to—*fall short*," I said curtly, and she gave a start of dismay.

"Oh, goodness, yes! Anything rather than that! I wouldn't for the world have Jacky find me out."

I felt like an aged grandam admonishing a silly child. Of course in the long run he was bound to find out, for Delphine's discontent was obviously increasing, and the hour was at hand when her self-control would come to a sudden and violent end. Then there would be hasty words and recriminations, the memory of which no after remorse could wipe away. I was sure of it, and said so plainly, qualifying my prophecy with a big "unless".

"Unless you can make up your mind to be honest *now*, and tell your husband the whole truth. There is nothing to be ashamed of in being young and needing variety in life. Tell him frankly that too much parish gets on your nerves, and that you could do your work better if you went away for a

few weeks every three or four months. There must be friends whom you could visit, and who would be glad to have you. After a change of scene and occupation you would come home braced and refreshed, and ready to make a fresh start. And you might speak about the room at the same time. You need not suggest selling any furniture, but just storing some of it away in an attic or cellar, so that you could have a little boudoir of your own. Do be sensible, and tell him to-night. He loves you. He wants you to be happy. He would understand."

She shook her head.

"No. He would be kind and patient. He would agree at once, and never say a word of reproach, but—he wouldn't understand. That's just it. His whole idea of me would be shocked out of existence. He would be disappointed to the bottom of his soul. I—I can't do it, Miss Wastneys; but it's been a relief to grumble to you. Thank you for letting me do it. Things have been just a little better since you and Mrs. Fane came to 'Pastimes'. I haven't seen much of you, of course, but I have enjoyed watching you. You wear such lovely clothes, and you are young and interesting. Most of the people are so dull and settled down. I wish you would call me 'Delphine,' and come to see me as often as you can. Just run in any time you are passing, and let me come to you in the same way.

I've been so bored. Well, never mind," she brightened suddenly; "the fête will be a little excitement. I *am* looking forward to that."

An idea flashed into my head. I was sorry for the girl, and intensely, forebodingly sorry for her husband. If one could help to avert the threatened tragedy.

"I am just wondering," I began tentatively. "Of course I can make no definite offer without consulting Mrs. Fane, but—would you like it if we lent our grounds for the fête? The extra space might be an advantage, and we could save you trouble by arranging for the tents and refreshments, and perhaps organise some little stall on our own account."

I really thought that might save a good deal of expense, and so add to the profit of the afternoon, and also that with our wider experience we might run the fête on more advanced lines, and so give her, as well as the rest of the parish, a more amusing time; but to my disappointment she flushed, and looked far from pleased.

"Oh, thanks, but—really, this is my affair! If I have all the duty and responsibility of being the Vicar's wife, I don't see why I should give up the fun of being hostess and arranging my own fête in my own way. It's very sweet of you, of course, and I'm very grateful. I hope you won't be offended."

I began to laugh.

“Offended! Why—Delphine, I was thinking entirely of you. I’m immensely relieved, if you want the real truth. That’s settled then, and we’ll give you some treasures for the Hunt. What would you like? Make up an appropriate list and send it along. Anything you like, up to—say five pounds!”

“Oh, you angel! Will you really?” she cried ecstatically. I had risen this time, and she slid her hand through my arm, and accompanied me to the door. Seen close at hand, her face looked almost childlike in its clear soft tints. I noticed also that her blouse was very fine and delicate, a very different thing from the cheap lace fineries which she had worn when I first saw her. She followed the direction of my eye, stroked down an upstarting frill, and coloured furiously. “Ah, my blouse! Do you admire it? I wrote to town for it, to your dressmaker, and I’ve ordered a lovely frock. You’ll see. For once in my life I shall be really well dressed! Seeing you and Mrs. Fane has made me discontented with my dowdy old rags!”

CHAPTER XI

THE GARDEN FÊTE

THE garden fête came off yesterday, and on the surface was a roaring success. The weather was ideal; the vicarage garden proved all that was necessary in the way of a background, and the arrangements were so extraordinarily complete that my practical mind was constantly confronted with the question, "Won't this *cost* far more than it gains?" In a big city a charity entertainment may throw out expensive baits with a fair chance of catching a shoal of fat and unwary fish; but in a small village the catch can be calculated to a sou. The big fish of the neighbourhood will heave a sigh of duteous resignation, put a five-pound note in the purse, and start for the fray prepared to spend it all, but not one penny more! The smaller fry carry out the same policy with ten or fifteen shillings. The minnows take half-a-crown, with which they pay for tea, and purchase soap at the provision stall, reporting to their husbands at night that, after all, the money was not wasted. The Vicar might just as well have it as the grocer. All the attractions

in the world cannot worm shillings out of a public which is so prudent and canny that it has self-guarded itself by leaving its cash at home !

Many times over yesterday afternoon I saw the flicker of longing in feminine eyes as they gazed upon the tempting novelties displayed upon the stalls, but the next moment the lips would screw, the feet pass by. Guild garments must be bought ; tea paid for ; tickets bought for the novel Treasure Hunt, wherein—with luck !—one might actually *gain* by the outlay. The visitors lingered to gaze at the pretty china, and glass, and embroideries with which Delphine had filled her stall ; but the afternoon wore on, and it looked as full as ever—horribly full ! There were none of those bare, blank spaces which stall-holders love to see. At five o'clock we marked off the odd sixpences ; at six o'clock we dropped a whole shilling, but still—hardly a sale !

Delphine looked—a vision ! At the first glimpse of her in her cobweb fineries, I was ill-bred enough to gape, whereat she blushed and said hurriedly :—

“ *Your* dressmaker ! Yes ! Isn't it a duck ? ”

And knowing the prices which Celeste charges for ducks with such feathers, I wondered, and—feared ! Did the Vicar know ? Was it possible that with his small stipend he could afford such extravagances ? Had the silly little thing ordered, and never *asked* ? Was it my fault for having given

the address? Could I have helped doing so, when I was asked? I *had* said she was expensive. It was some small comfort to remember that, and Charmion would say it was no concern of mine. A dozen such disconcerting thoughts raced through my mind, but I shook them off, and said heartily:—

“It is lovely! *You* are lovely! I had no idea you were such a beauty. What does your husband say?”

Her face clouded.

“Nothing. Doesn’t notice. Likes me as much in an old print. But I—*love* it! Oh, you don’t know what bliss it is to feel ‘finished off’. Everything new, good, pretty, and to match!” She gave a rapid swirling movement of the hand to call my attention to such details as shoes and stockings, embroidered bag, and glorified garden hat. “It’s nothing to *you*. You have had them all your life, but I have only longed and—*starved*!”

She spoke with a passionate emphasis, which to many people would seem out of all keeping with the subject; but I am young, and a girl, so I understood. There are many empty-headed women in whom the craving for pretty things is as strong as the masculine craving for drink and cards. Circumstances have compelled these women to wear the plainest, most useful of clothes, while every shop window shows a tantalising display of colour and

beauty, and other women not half so pretty as themselves bloom with a borrowed radiance !

No mere man can understand the inborn feminine joy in the feel of fine smooth fabric, nor the blending of delicate colours, the dainty ruffling of lace. To the rich these things come as a matter of course, and the working classes are satisfied with garish imitations ; it is the poor gentlewoman with the cultivated taste, the cultivated longing for beauty, to whom temptation comes in its keenest form. It had come to Delphine, and she had succumbed. I devoutly hoped and prayed that the shock of the coming bill would prevent further extravagances !

Charmion and I took charge of the Treasure Hunt. We had given the treasures, which were laboriously chosen with a view to suitability. Umbrellas (lashed flat to the trunks of trees !), bags, photograph frames, writing cases, boxes of handkerchiefs, chocolate, cigarettes, scent, and—this was a cunning idea !—cash orders on a big London store.

There was a great rush for tickets, and the Vicar—very flurried, and out of his element, poor man !—dragged in the Squire to help us. The Squire had arrived with his mother an hour before, and had sat under a cedar, drinking tea with a selection of old ladies and gentlemen, looking as though he liked it quite well. Whenever he met

my eye, he glowered, as if to say, "How dare you look at me!" and I smiled back, as that seemed to annoy him most. Now, as the Vicar brought him up, I could hear his muttered protests: "Rather not! Can't *you*—isn't there something else?" Pleasing thing, I must say, to have a man forced to help you against his will!

Well, it was no use making a fuss before a score of curious eyes, so for the next half-hour we stood side by side, selling tickets, explaining the rules of the Hunt, marshalling the seekers in readiness for the signal to start. He is capable enough, I will say that for him, and has a patent knack of silencing garrulous questioners. It was the funniest thing in the world to stand at the end of the lawn, and watch these rustic backs—young, old, and fat middle-aged—all poised on one leg, swaying to and fro, straining to be off! Excruciatingly funny to watch the stampede, after the loud "One—two—three—and away!" The plunges, the waddles, the skelter of flying heels! One might have thought the gold of Klondyke was hidden in the kitchen garden. I laughed, and laughed, in a good old Irish paroxysm of merriment, until the tears rolled down my cheeks. Mr. Maplestone stared, turned on his heel, and stalked away.

I strolled back to the upper lawn, and the first person I saw was old General Underwood sitting in his bath-chair, which had been drawn under the

shade of a tree, so that he might see everything, and yet be well out of the way. He was too much out of the way, poor old dear! to judge by his looks, and agreeably pleased to see my approach.

"Well, young lady, and how are you to-day? You look very fresh and charming!"

"That's very nice of you, General! I do like to be admired. Isn't this rather a dull corner for you? Wouldn't you like to be moved?"

He looked around with his old, blue eyes.

"Everyone seems to have gone. There was quite a crowd here a few minutes ago. I sent my man to the village to post some letters."

"We can manage without him. There is a Treasure Hunt going on at the other end of the garden. That is why this part is so empty. Mrs. Merrivale has hidden a lot of parcels among the trees and shrubs, and everyone who pays a shilling can go and search for a treasure."

"Ha!" His face lit up with the hunting instinct, which seems dormant in us all. "Treasures—I see! A good idea. Worth more, I presume, than the entrance shilling?"

"Oh, much, much more." The pride of the donor sounded in my voice; then I looked at the poor, old, tired, wistful face, and had a brilliant idea. "General, shall *we* go hunting—you and I? I'll push and you'll steer, and we'll both look, and if it's a man's present, it's yours, and if it's a woman's, it's mine,

and if it's neutral, we'll toss! They've only just started, so we're in time."

He gripped the handle involuntarily, then loosened it to say :—

"My dear, I'm too heavy. Wait till my man——"

"Nonsense! I'm as strong as a horse. Who waits is lost. To the right, please, General. Straight down this path, and into the herbaceous garden. *Quite* slowly, and keep a sharp eye between the branches."

He quite chuckled with delight. Viewed from the vantage ground of a bath-chair, a Treasure Hunt was delirious excitement, but he *was* heavy! I remembered a sharp upward curve some way further on, and had a vision of myself pushing, with arms extended to full length, and feet at a considerable distance between the arms, as I have seen small nursemaids push pram-loads of fat twins. How undignified it would be if I slipped half way, and the chair backed over my prone body! Then, of course, the thing happened which I might have been sure and certain *would* happen under the circumstances. We came face to face with Mr. Maplestone, and the General called out :—

"Hi, Ralph! There you are. Just the man we want. Miss Wastneys and I are hunting. Come and give a hand."

"Oh, if you have the Squire, you won't need me. I'll go off on my own," I cried quickly; but it was

no use, the old man wanted both, and both he would have. The Squire was to push behind ; I was to take the handle and pull in front ; he himself must be free to hunt, since he was handicapped by old eyes. He issued orders with the assurance of a Commander-in-Chief, and we listened and obeyed.

I started by feeling annoyed and impatient, but honestly, after the first few minutes, it was great fun. The Squire was an abominable pusher ; first he pushed too little and left all the work to me ; and then, being upbraided, he pushed too hard and tilted me into a run ; then we changed places, and he took the wrong turnings, wheeled past plain grass beds where nothing could possibly be hidden ; then we *both* took the back, and the General peered from side to side, and saw nothing, and grew discouraged, and sighed, and said his luck had gone. No treasures for him any more !

I will say for Ralph Maplestone that he is sweet to that old man ! He treats him just in the right way, as deferentially as though he were in full health and strength, a martial figure riding gloriously to conquest ! We cheered him up between us (I did it rather nicely, too !), and became quite friendly in the process. Two people can't join in pushing a bath chair and remain *de haut en bas*. The thing is impossible. I was most nice to Ralph Maplestone, and he appeared to be nice to me.

Suddenly, in the middle of a bush, I saw a glint

of brighter green, the tissue-paper wrapping of a treasure, and instantly my fingers gripped the chair. Mr. Maplestone would have pushed on, but I frowned and grimaced, and he looked and saw too, and we both puffed and panted, and demanded a rest, during which I stood elaborately at one side of the bush, and he stood at the other, so that the old dear could hardly miss seeing the paper.

Even then I had to give it a surreptitious push before discovery came; but he had no suspicions, not one, and was as pleased as a boy at the thought that his old eyes had been sharper than our young ones. We all took a turn at opening the parcel, and it turned out to be a vanity bag, fitted with a mirror and other frivolities, so of course it was presented to me, and I arranged my hair in the mirror, and powdered my nose with the puff, just to shock them, which, by the way, it fully succeeded in doing.

"Girls didn't do that in *my* day!" croaked the General.

"*All* girls don't do it now!" grunted the Squire.

"My dear, you look far nicer without it." This was the General's second venture. I turned to the Squire and asked solemnly, "*Do* I?" and he gave one quick look, and then stared past me—through me—blankly into space.

"I am no judge," he said curtly.

Well, let me be honest! It *was* flirtatious of me, I knew it was, and hurried to rub off the powder,

and get back to my briskest, most business-like manner. As we had paid three entrance fees, we were entitled to a treasure apiece, if we could find them, and I insisted upon keeping up the search to the very last moment. It amused the General; it amused me; I honestly believe that it amused Mr. Maplestone, as far as he was capable of being amused. He was quite human; once or twice, as we rushed after a "scent," he was even *lively*. I began to think he might really be quite nice.

We found one other parcel—a box of cigarettes—and then made our way back to the lawn, where the General's valet was waiting, and took over the chair. Delphine came up to me and slipped her hand through my arm.

"Evelyn, you have managed beautifully, but you must be dead tired and longing for tea. I'm going to stand over you and make you rest. Stupid of Jacky to send the Squire to help you! You'd have been happier with anyone else, but he's so dense, so in the clouds, that he doesn't notice these things. Evelyn, isn't it strange how he dislikes you?"

"Who? Your husband?"

"Nonsense. No. You know quite well—Mr. Maplestone. At first, of course, one can understand he was prejudiced; but *now*! And when you have been so nice!"

"Thank you for that. I'm glad you appreciate me. Why are you so sure the Squire does not?"

"Because," she said imperturbably, "he tells me so!"

Curiosity is a terrible thing. It's bad enough when it concerns itself about other people, but when it comes to oneself, it's ten times worse. I *ached* to ask, "When?" and "Where?" and "How?" and exactly in what words Mr. Maplestone's dislike had been expressed, but pride closed my lips, and I would not let myself go. Of course I had known before, but I had imagined that after the chair episode—— What stings is not the dislike itself, but the putting it into words to such a confidante as Delphine. No, let me be honest; the dislike itself *does* sting. I have my own petty feminine craving, and it is to be liked, to have people appreciate and approve of me, if they do nothing more. Even indifference is difficult to bear, but *dislike*—— Well, thank goodness, I have lived in a warm-hearted country among warm-hearted people who have loved me for my name if for nothing else. Really and truly, I believe this ugly, red-headed man is the first person who has ever dared to speak openly of dislike for Evelyn Wastneys!

I pity and despise him. I wouldn't have his approval if I could. Henceforth I shall never think of him, nor mention his name. To me he is dead. All is over between us before anything ever began! It is finished. This is the end.

The fête ended at nine o'clock, and Charmion

and I, with the other stall-holders, went into the vicarage to enjoy a supper of scraps. As a rule I adore scrap suppers after everyone has gone, and the servants have gone to bed, and the guests make sorties into the pantry, and bring out plates of patties and fruit, and derelict méringues, and wobbling halves of jellies and creams. They taste so *good*, eaten in picnic fashion before the fire, with a shortage of forks and spoons, and a plate as a lucky chance. But somehow last night things didn't *go*! I think perhaps there were too many "scraps" which should by rights have been sold and paid for in good hard cash. The Vicar was full of hospitable zeal, and evidently enjoyed pressing the good things upon his guests, but there was something in Delphine's pale glance which checked merriment. She had had her fun, the interest of planning, the excitement of playing hostess to the country-side, the satisfaction of knowing herself to be the best-dressed, most admired woman present, and of queening it over women who had hitherto patronised herself. Poor little butterfly! she had enjoyed her hour, but now the sun had gone down, and she was counting the cost. The treasurer added up the coins handed in from the various stalls and announced the total. There was a little pause.

"Ah!" said the Vicar slowly. "More than last year, but not so much as we hoped. How will it work out, dear, after paying expenses?"

"Oh, Jacky, I'm *tired*! Can't we have supper in peace, before worrying about money!" she cried pettishly.

Not another word was said.

When we were driving home, Charmion gave me a shock.

"I rather like Mrs. Maplestone," she said dreamily. "She is stiff and conventional, and it has never even occurred to her that anyone can disagree with her views, and still have a glimmering of right, but, at least, she is sincere. If one could burrow deep enough beneath the surface, she'd be worth knowing."

"I don't like people who have to be burrowed. Life is too short. And I am perfectly certain that I should shock her into fits. Personally, I don't intend to take the trouble of excavating!"

"That's unfortunate, for she wishes to know you. She has invited us to dinner next Wednesday to meet some friends."

"Charmion! You didn't accept?"

"Certainly I did. Wasn't it your express desire to be sociable, and to know your neighbours?"

"Oh, not them—not there! It's pleasant knowing a few people, but one is at liberty to choose. I think you might have consulted me!"

In the soft dusk she laughed, and stretched out a caressing hand.

"Tired, dear, and—cross? I thought you'd be

pleased. Why and wherefore? Tell me the truth?"

"Oh, don't be so tiresome, Charmion. Of course I am tired. I've been on my feet all day long. Cross! Why should I be cross? Only—I don't choose to accept hospitality from that man. I tell you plainly I won't go."

She bowed her head, deliberately, once and again.

"Oh, yes, Evelyn, you will! I gave you your choice, and having made it you will play fair. I should have preferred to remain peacefully at Coventry, but having taken the first step at your request, I don't propose to allow you to force me into society *alone*."

What could I say? What was it *possible* to say? There is no way out of it. I shall just have to go!

CHAPTER XII

A REVELATION

THE Vicar has called to tell us that Delphine has made up her accounts, and that the fête has cleared fifty pounds more than the smaller affair last year. He seemed pleased and proud, and I was delighted, too, and immensely relieved, because I had really been horribly afraid there would be no profit at all! Curious to think where all the money came from to pay heavy expenses, and still clear so much! It just shows how small sums add up. I asked if Delphine were very pleased, and he hesitated, and said:—

“She seems tired. Feeling the reaction, no doubt. She worked so hard.”

An imp of curiosity tempted me to see if he were really as blind as he appeared.

“She made a splendid hostess. And didn’t she look charming, too? I am sure you were proud of her in that lovely new frock!”

His eyes softened with a deep *glow-ey* look, which was reserved for Delphine alone.

“I am always proud of her. She always looks

charming ; but the dress—I am afraid I must plead guilty. I know nothing about her dress.”

“ Really ? Truly ? You couldn’t tell what it was like ? ”

“ Not for a thousand pounds ! ”

I stared at him, frowning.

“ If I had a husband I should *like* him to know. I should be furious if I made a special effort, and he didn’t even notice that I had anything new.”

He smiled with a forbearing air.

“ Surely not ! I think better of you, Miss Wastneys. Dress is altogether unimportant.”

“ Not to me. Not to your wife. There are some women to whom it is the greatest temptation in life.”

He looked outraged, disgusted, and changed the subject with a resolute air, but I was glad that I had spoken. A husband can be too unworldly, and lost in the clouds. It would be the best thing in the world for Delphine if he *did* notice, and that in more ways than one !

In the afternoon Charmion and I called at the vicarage to congratulate Delphine, and found her distinctly the worse for wear. Pale, heavy-eyed, and inclined to snap, a very different creature from the radiant butterfly of three days ago. She was glad to see me, however, I was someone to snap at, which was what she wanted most at the moment, and she worked off quite a lot of steam, hectoring me about things I might have done better,

or not done at all, and impressing on me for future occasions that I should be less independent, and take more advice. She likewise informed us, quite incidentally and "by the way," that Mrs. Ross had disliked my hat and Mrs. Bruce had asked if Charmion were anæmic—such a colourless skin!—and Mrs. Someone Else thought it so "QUEER" that we should live together! Altogether she behaved like a spoiled, ill-tempered child, but she looked so young and worried and pretty through it all, that on the whole I felt more sorry for her than myself. As for Charmion, she smiled, with an air of listening from an illimitable distance, which I can quite understand has an exasperating effect on people who do not understand and care. It exasperated Delphine now. I saw the blue eyes flash, and the pink lips set, with a peevish desire to "hit back!"

"Mrs. Bruce said her family know the Fane family quite well. They come from the same county. She was telling them about you, but, of course, not knowing your husband's Christian name made it difficult. She thought it so queer to have your own Christian name printed on your cards——"

"Did she?" said Charmion blandly.

"It is an American custom," I put in hastily. "I should do the same if I had such a fascinating name."

"I wouldn't!" Delphine said—"it's so queer. Unless, of course, one's husband had a hideous

name—Elisha, or Jonathan, or something like that. Even then one might leave it out."

"I shouldn't dream of marrying anyone called Elisha."

"What was—is—your favourite man's name?"

"Jacky," said Charmion naughtily.

Delphine's eyes flashed.

"Was that your husband's name?"

"Oh no."

The pink lips opened to ask a further, more definite question, but it died unsaid. The steady gaze of Charmion's eyes prevented that. She would be a bold woman who could defy that silent challenge!

We made our escape, and walked home in silence. Charmion seemed very depressed, and went to bed at nine o'clock. Next time I see Delphine Merri-vale, I shall tell her plainly that I will—not—have Mrs. Fane annoyed with questions about the past!

Last night we dined at the Hall. Last night things happened. We started feeling quite festive and excited, for, after a strictly domestic life for nearly five months, it becomes quite thrilling to dine in another house, and to eat food which one has not ordered oneself. As we drove along the lanes, we amused ourselves like schoolgirls, guessing what we "would have," and who would "take

us in". Charmion, as the married woman, would obviously fall to the Squire. I hoped I should be at the other end of the table, with a partner who was sweet tempered and appreciative. Bridget had come back from posting a letter, bearing the thrilling news that the Squire's car had been to the station to meet a party of guests. Two fine, up-standing ladies, and a gentleman with a figure like a wooden Noah in the Ark. The shoulders of him!—that square you might have cut them with a knife! It was refreshing to know that we were to meet people who did *not* live within a radius of five miles. I rather hoped those shoulders would fall to my share!

They did. He is an American. I might have guessed that by the description, and one of the "fine upstanding ones" is his bride, and they have been "doing" England for a few weeks, before starting on a year's honeymoon in the East. The explanation of their appearance at the Hall is that they "chanced" to have met the Squire years ago in America, and wished to renew the acquaintance. So things came about! Mr. Elliott is an interesting man, and, like all Americans, loves to talk about his own country. He was pained and shocked to hear I had never crossed the Atlantic, until I told him that half myself, in the person of an only sister, had gone in my place. I was just going to add that Charmion also had spent a great part of her

life in the States, when—something stopped me—one of those mysterious impulses which, at times, lay a finger on our lips, and check the coming words.

Charmion sat on one side of the Squire, Mrs. Elliott on the other. I was half-way down the table, sandwiched in between a dozen comfortable, middle-aged worthies, who were all intimate friends, if not actually related to each other, and their conversation, though interesting to themselves, was not thrilling to an outsider. I saw the American's quick eye dart from one to the other, and hoped he was not classifying the company as typical English wits! The dinner itself was long, heavy, and unenterprising; a Victorian feast, even to the "specimen glass" decorations. One rose and one spray of maidenhair, in a tall thin glass, before each separate diner. Charmion and the Squire talked and laughed together, and seemed quite happy. She is a lovely creature when she is animated; there is a dainty charm about every movement which makes her seem of a different clay from human creatures. Even to see Charmion *eat* is a beautiful thing!

All the same, that dinner was a trial of patience, and I was thankful when it was over. In the old-fashioned way, we left the men to their smoke, and wandered through the drawing-room into a big domed palm-house, which in its fragrant dimness,

with the giant palms reaching to the very roof, looked much more inviting than the drawing-room with its glaring incandescent lights.

The American bride attached herself to me and chatted amusingly enough. Before her marriage she had lived "out west," so I plied her with questions about ranch life. Kathie writes regularly enough, but she is a wretch about answering questions, and is not half detail-ey enough to satisfy my curiosity. We stood leaning against one of the tiered flower-stands, enjoying the scent and the beauty, chatting together so lightly and calmly, blankly unsuspecting, as we so often are in the big moments of life, of what lies immediately ahead. Between the spreading branches I caught sight of Charmion looking at me with raised, inquiring brows. She had noted my eagerness, and was wondering what point of interest had been discovered between the wordy American and myself. I raised my voice, and cried happily:—

"Oh, Charmion! Mrs. Elliott knows Kathie's home. She has stayed there herself. I am asking her all about it."

She smiled, and moved forward as if to join us. Mrs. Elliott gave a little start, and repeated curiously, "*Charmion!* Is Mrs. Fane called Charmion? That's a very unusual name. I have only heard it once before. Very sweet, isn't it, but association goes for so much!"

"It does. In this case it makes the name all the more charming."

"Why, yes, that is so. Mrs. Fane is a lovely woman. But I guess I was less fortunate in my specimen. I never met her myself, but she married a man I knew well, and—ran away from him on their honeymoon!"

I laughed. I am so glad I laughed. So glad there was time to say lightly, "*She was* soon tired!" before, between the spreading leaves of a palm, I caught Charmion's eyes—*my* Charmion!—staring into mine, and knew that she had overheard—knew more—knew, in a blundering flash of intuition, that the words which had just been spoken referred to no stranger, but to herself! Fortunately for us both, Mrs. Elliott was facing me, so she did not see, as I did, the sudden pause, the blanching face, the dumb appeal of the stricken eyes.

I flashed back reassurement, and at once led the way forward—out of the conservatory, back to the drawing-room, affecting to be tired, to want to sit down. Mrs. Elliott followed, unperturbed. It didn't matter to her where she went, the one indispensable necessity was to talk, and to have someone to listen. She continued her history with voluble emphasis.

"I should think it *was* soon! Well, I guess she might have thought it out before she went so far. Too hard on a man to be treated like that. Kind of

humiliates him before his friends, that a woman couldn't put up with him one month——”

“I shouldn't worry about *his* pride,” I said curtly. “What about hers? It would be worse than humiliating for a woman to be *obliged* to go! He must have been a poor thing!”

“Well, I don't know. He was a real popular man. He may have been a bit careless and extravagant; quite a good many young men are that, but they settle down into staid, steady-going husbands if the right woman comes along to help. Doesn't seem to me, Miss Wastneys, that it's *possible* for any man to be so bad, that in three weeks the woman who had promised to stick to him till death should throw up the sponge!”

It did not seem so to me, either, so I made no comment. I should not have been human if I had not burned to ask questions, but I would not allow myself to do it. What Charmion wished me to hear, she would tell me herself. The time had come when she *would* tell me. I knew that. This chance encounter had decided the moment when her silence should be broken.

Mrs. Elliott smothered a yawn, and straightened a diamond bracelet on her wrist. The diamonds were massed together so heavily that the weight dragged them to the inside of her arm, leaving only the plain gold band in sight, a hiding of treasures which did not please the owner.

“Well,” she said deliberately once more, “I guess it was a real cruel trick. Whatever he’d done, she put herself in the wrong that time. The poor fellow’s not done a mite of good ever since.”

I had to hold myself tight to prevent a start. *Not done!* She talked of the man in the present case, as though he were alive, as though—stupefying thought!—*Charmion was not a widow after all!* The thought was stupefying, but even as it passed through my brain, I realised that no word of her own had been responsible for my conviction that her husband was dead. It was rather because she never *did* mention him that Kathie and I had made so sure that he did not exist. My thoughts dived into the past, recalling faded impressions. I remembered how Kathie had said, “She must have loved him dreadfully not to be able to refer to him even now!” And how I had been silent, fighting the impression that it was the ghost of sorrow, rather than of joy, which sealed Charmion’s lips.

The door opened, and the men came into the room. The different groups broke up and drifted here and there; into the palm house to look at the flowers, back into the drawing-room to talk, drink coffee, and glance surreptitiously at the clock. In this old-fashioned household, no one thought of providing any other amusement for a dinner party than the dinner itself. Having been well fed, the guests were expected to amuse themselves for the hour that

remained. In an ordinary way I could have taken my share in the amusing; I like talking, and am never troubled by not knowing what to say. Given people to listen, and look appreciative, I can monologue for an indefinite time. But—to-night!

Inside the palm-house I could see Charmion's grey figure reclining in a wicker chair, her face ivory-white against the cushions. She was waving her fan to and fro, and listening with apparent attention to the conversation of her companions. I guessed how little she would hear; how bitter must be the dread at her heart; how endlessly, interminably long the moments must seem.

"Miss Wastneys, would you care to see the picture we were talking about at dinner?"

It was Mr. Maplestone's voice. I looked up and saw him standing by my side, and rose at once, thankful for any movement which would pass the time. We left the room together, walked to the end of the long corridor, and drew up before the picture of an uninteresting old man with several chins, and the small, steel-blue eyes which seem a family inheritance. This was a celebrated Romney, which had been the subject of a protracted law-suit between different branches of the family, which had cost the losing party over a thousand pounds. I thought, but did not say, that I would have been obliged to anyone who would have taken him away, free, gratis, for nothing, rather than that he should hang on *my*

walls. Spoken comment, under the circumstances, was a little difficult and halting!

"This is the Romney."

"Oh yes."

"My grandfather."

"I see. Yes. How interesting."

He laughed—a short, derisive bark.

"That's the last thing you can call it! A more uninteresting production I never beheld. What right had he to waste good canvas? That is one point in which we do show more common sense than our ancestors. We do not consider it necessary to inflict our portraits on posterity."

"No. We don't. At least——"

He swung round, facing me, with his back to the open drawing-room door, his face suddenly keen and alert.

"Miss Wastneys—never mind the picture! I brought you out as an excuse. I wanted to ask—*What's the matter?*"

The question rapped out, short and sharp. I looked at him, made a big effort to be bright, and natural, and defiant, and realised suddenly that I was trembling; that, while my cheeks were hot, my hands were cold as ice; that, in short, the shock and excitement of the last half hour was taking its physical revenge. For two straws I could have burst out crying there and then. It is a ridiculous feminine weakness to be given to tears at critical

moments, but if you have it, you have it, and so far I have not discovered a cure. I could have kept going if he had taken no notice, and gone on talking naturally; but that question knocked me over, so I just stared at him and gulped, and pressed my hands together, with that awful, awful sensation which comes over one when one knows it is madness to give way, and yet feels that the moment after next you are just going to *do* it, and nothing can stop you!

I thought of Charmion, sitting calm and quiet in the palm-house; I thought of that first horrible interview in the inn parlour; I thought of my heroic ancestors. It was no use; every moment I drew nearer and nearer to the breaking-point. I still stared, but the Squire's face was growing misty, growing into a big, red-brown blur. Then suddenly a hand gripped my arm, and a voice said sharply:—

“Don't cry, please! No necessity to cry. You are tired. I will order the car. It shall be round in five minutes. You can surely pull yourself together for five minutes?”

The voice was like a douche of cold water. I shivered under it, but felt wonderfully braced.

“Oh, thank you, but we ordered a fly.”

“That's all right. I'll see to that. No one shall know anything about it. You will leave earlier than you expected—that's all. I'm sorry”—his lean face twitched—“the time has seemed so long!”

“It’s not”—I said feebly—“it’s not that!” But he led the way back to the drawing-room, taking no notice. Five minutes later “Mrs. Fane’s carriage” was announced, and we bade a protesting hostess good-night.

Charmion and I sat silent, hand in hand, all the way home. She felt cold as ice, but she clung to me; her fingers closed over mine. Just as we reached our own door she whispered a few words.

“I’ll come to your room, dear. Wait up for me.”

The time had come when I was to hear Charmion’s story from her own lips!

CHAPTER XIII

MORE BITTER THAN DEATH

CHARMION came to my room in her white dressing-gown, with her long hair hanging plaited down her back. Remembering the icy hands I had held in mine, I had lit the gas fire, and she cowered gratefully over its warmth.

"Kind of you, dear! Warmth is comforting. Well, Evelyn, so the time has come. I have waited, screwing up my courage; but the hour has been decided for us."

"Not unless you choose," I cried hastily. "I would far rather never hear——"

She checked me with a wan smile.

"I *do* choose. When it is over, it will be a relief. I want you to know. You will understand better, and I shall not pain you so much, dear, kind Evelyn, by my harsh ways. So all this time you have believed that I was a happy widow?"

The expression jarred. She saw the shrinking in my eyes, and smiled again, in the same wan, hopeless fashion.

"Oh, I *mean* it. Death comes like a sword, but

in the end it is merciful, for it brings peace. The one who is left suffers many pangs, but in time—in time, learns to be thankful for all that the beloved is spared. It is the living troubles which sear the heart. I have envied the widows who could look up and say, ‘It is well with him. We shall meet again.’ With me it has been all bitterness, all rebellion.”

I sat silent, not daring to interrupt, and after a moment’s pause she began again, speaking in a still, level tone, with hardly any variety of expression.

“I am an orphan like you, Evelyn. Both my parents died before I was fourteen, and I was sent over to America to live with a grandmother aunt. I was an heiress, unfortunately—you know my views about riches!—and by my father’s will I came into my money at eighteen. My aunt was a wise woman, and even to her intimate friends she never gave a hint of my fortune. She was a wealthy woman herself, and had no daughter, only one son, so it seemed natural that she should give me a good time, dress me prettily, and take me about. She had a horror of fortune-hunters, and wanted me to be loved for myself, and be as happily married as she had been before me. When I came out she brought me over to London for a season, and I was presented; but that was my one and only visit to England in fifteen years. I was glad to go back to New York, for my real friends were there. We

had grown up together, and had the associations of years. In England I had only acquaintances. Well! So it went on, the happiest of lives, till I was twenty-four. Several men wanted to marry me, but I never met anyone whom it was possible to think of as a husband until——”

“Your husband?”

“Yes. We were away for the summer—a whole party of us—camping in the most delicious spot. I wish you could join an American camping party some time, Evelyn. It’s just the happiest, freest, most ideal of lives! He came down as the guest of some other people. The daughter was one of my own friends. I thought at first that she cared for him herself, but he never paid her any attention—not the slightest; rather avoided her indeed, even before——”

“He cared for you. Did it begin—*soon*—Charmion?”

“I cared for him the first moment we met. I was sitting at a long tea-table set out in the open, and my friend brought him up to a seat right opposite to mine. She said, ‘Charmion, this is Phil—Phil, this is Charmion!’ It was one of the rules of the camp that we called each other by our Christian names. The life was so informal that ‘Mr.’ and ‘Miss’ seemed out of place. I looked up and met his eyes, and—it was different from anything I had felt before.

"He came for a week, but he stayed on and on until it was nearly a month. I can't talk about it, Evelyn. Such times can never last. Even at the best it is impossible that they can last. Perfect happiness is not for this world. It was all beautiful. The place where we camped was like another Garden of Eden; the weather was exquisite, such days, such mornings! Oh, Evelyn, such nights! The sky a dome of deepest blue, with the stars shining as you never saw them in this damp, misty atmosphere. And he and I——"

Her voice broke. Her hand went up to her face to hide the quivering of her lips. It was a petrifying thing to see Charmion break down. I turned away my eyes, unable to bear it. There was silence in the room for several moments, then she began again.

"Nothing was said in words. I didn't want him to speak. I was perfectly happy, perfectly sure, and I dreaded the publicity of an engagement. Every one talking, questioning, teasing. It would have seemed profanation. Besides—if Marjorie had really cared as I suspected, it would have been painful for her. I wouldn't *let* him speak until we got back to New York, and then, the very night I arrived, Aunt Mary was taken dangerously ill. She lingered a few weeks, but there was never any hope. Then she died and I was left alone, for her son, my cousin, lived in India.

“All that time he—my husband—had been coming to see me every day. The doctor insisted that I should go out to be braced by the fresh air, so he took me long drives, long walks, and then sat by me indoors, comforting me, helping, advising. He was everything to me, Evelyn! Aunt Mary was dying, and she had been like a mother, but when he was with me I was satisfied; I was content. When she died, he urged an immediate marriage, and I was quite ready. She had left no money to me, but I told him I had some of my own. He kissed me, and”—again her hand went up to hide that quivering lip—“he said that did not concern him. He could keep his wife. What money I had I must keep for myself, to pay for ‘little extravagancies’.

“I was thankful that he did not know, thankful that he did not care. I looked forward to telling him after we were married, and seeing his face of surprise. We had planned to live in an apartment until we had time to choose a house for ourselves. I laughed to think how much bigger and finer it would be than the little house of his dreams. He was not at all rich—did I tell you that? He had had a pretty hard struggle all his life, and had only quite a moderate income. I went to my lawyer and settled a fourth of my income on him for life. I knew if we lived in a bigger way there would be calls upon him which he would not otherwise have had. Calls for subscriptions, for charities, a

dozen other claims. I hated to think that he should have to come to me for money, or that cheques should be drawn in my name. He asked me what I was going to give him as a wedding present, and I laughed, and said, 'Nothing interesting. Only a little note!' The settlement was to be my gift."

Silence again. I felt for her hand and held it tight. Tragedy was coming; I knew it. I waited, tense with suspense.

"We were married very quietly. Only two or three people in the church. He called for me. It was unconventional, but I was nervous and weak, and he knew he could give me strength. We went up the aisle together, hand in hand. The man who was to give me away followed behind. Many people in America are married in their own homes, but I preferred a church. I've been sorry since. It has seemed a profanation. To stand before the altar in God's house and take those solemn vows, while all the time—all the time——"

She shuddered, and paused to regain self-possession.

"Well, Evelyn—well! I had two weeks' happiness, two weeks in my fool's paradise, and then—the end came! He had gone over to New York for a day. Some important business had arisen and he was obliged to go. He said good-bye." She paused again, struggling for composure. "It *was* good-bye—good-bye for ever. He did not know

that, but he parted from me as—a husband might from the wife of his heart. It was impossible to doubt. I was as sure of him, Evelyn—as sure as that the sun is in the sky!

“After he had gone a letter was handed to me. I did not know the writing, but inside—I could not understand it—was a letter in his own writing. Nothing else, just this one sheet, with one long passage underscored. I did not stop to think; the words leapt at me, my own name first of all; and after I had begun to read there was no stopping short. It was the second sheet of a letter, so I could not tell to whom it had been written; but evidently it was to a man to whom money was owing, and who had been pressing for a settlement. It was full of apologies for having failed to pay before; and then—then came the passage that had been underlined. Perhaps, he said, in a few months’ time things would look up. *There was a girl.* In a roundabout way, through an English acquaintance, he had heard that she had a pile of money, though the fact had been kept dark in America. There was no doubt about it, since his informant was a member of the legal firm who had wound up her father’s estate. By a stroke of good luck the girl was staying at a summer camp with some of his own friends. He had engineered an invitation, and was there at the moment of writing.

“Think of it, Evelyn—at that very moment I was,

perhaps, sitting innocently by his side. We used to scribble our letters together, sitting out in the woods, and break off every few minutes to laugh and chatter. Probably, after it was finished, we walked together to the nearest post, and as we went he looked at me—*he looked*. Oh!"—she winced in irrepressible misery—"is it *possible*—is it *possible* that any man could act so well? Can you wonder that I am hard and cold—that I have so little sympathy for outside troubles? I was once as loving and impetuous as you are yourself, but that shock turned me to stone. It killed my faith in human nature!"

She was silent, struggling for composure, and I laid my hand on her knee, and sat silent, not daring to speak. What was there to say? I realised now how infinitely more bitter than death was the loss which Charmion had to bear.

"Well"—she roused herself to go on with her story—"you can imagine the rest. 'The heiress was,' he wrote, '*quite a possible girl*,' and seemed '*agreeably disposed*'. There was evidently no previous entanglement, and the circumstances were propitious. It was his intention to go in and win. If it came off he would be in a position to pay up old scores and to start life afresh. It would be worth giving up his liberty, to end the everlasting worry of the last ten years. The letter ended with more promises and his signature. No loophole of

doubt was left, you see. There could be no mistaking that signature. I had been married exactly two weeks, and had believed myself the happiest woman in the world. I now discovered that I had been tracked down by an adventurer, who had married me only because, unfortunately, it was impossible to get hold of my fortune without putting up with me at the same time."

"What did he say, how did he look, when you told him about your money and the settlement? Of course, you *had* told him by that time."

"Not much. Very little indeed. I thought at the time that he was overwhelmed, and a little sorry that the wealth was on my side. Looking back, I do him the justice to believe that he was ashamed! Even such a deliberate schemer might well feel a pang under the circumstances. I remember that he put his elbows on the table, and hid his face in his hands. He never alluded to the subject again, neither did I. There seemed plenty of time. I loved him all the more because he was not wildly elated. All my life I had been trained to dread fortune-hunters, to value sincerity above every other virtue."

"But during those two weeks *after* you were married, he still seemed to—*care*? You believed in him still?"

"Absolutely! Utterly! I must be easily duped, Evelyn, for with all my heart I believed that that

man loved me as deeply as I loved him. Every word—every look! Oh, he was a finished actor! It all seemed so real—so *real*——”

“Charmion, after you had read that letter and understood all that it meant, what did you do?”

“I went to my room, packed a bag with a few changes of clothing, collected all the money I had with me, quite a large sum in notes, and caught the afternoon train for New York. I had no idea where I was going. My one longing was to escape before he came back, but things were decided for me. The shock made me faint, and in the heat of the train I felt worse every hour. When we stopped at a half-way station I stepped out on to the platform in the same dull, dazed way, hardly realising what I was doing, and carried my bag out into the street. Half a mile away I saw a notice of rooms to let, in the window of a small house, and I knocked and went in.

“I stayed in that house for over six months, Evelyn. The woman was a saint—the kindest, gentlest creature I have ever met. I told her that I was ill and in trouble, and wanted to rest, and she put me to bed and nursed me like a child. I was a long time in getting well. The very strings of my being seemed to have snapped. I lay torpid week after week, and the good soul took care of me and asked no questions. She was one of those rare spirits who pray to God to guide them day by day,

and mean literally what they ask. God had sent me to her in my need—that was her firm belief—and what she did for me she did for Him. I had left no message behind—only that terrible letter sealed up, to be given to my husband on his return. I heard afterwards that he had searched for me far and wide, had even crossed over to England, thinking I must be here. When I was well enough I sent for my aunt's lawyer and took him into my confidence. He let me know when my husband returned to America, and as soon as possible after that I came to England myself, under another name. I was no longer his wife in heart. Why should I keep a name which was given to me under false pretences? Five years have passed since then. It seems like a century, and—here I am!”

“And all this time you have heard nothing? Nothing has happened?”

“Yes. I have heard. He seems to have—felt it a good deal! It is always painful to be discovered, and for a man's wife to leave him before the honeymoon is over is hurtful to his pride. He makes periodic efforts to find me, but my lawyers are loyal, and will give no clue.”

“And the settlement? The money you made over to him? Does he draw that still?”

She flushed and frowned.

“No. It appears not. He tells the lawyers that he will never touch it. I suppose if he changed

his manner of living it would be remarked, and people might guess something of the truth. His object is, of course, to throw all the blame on me."

The bitterness of her voice hurt me so that I ventured a timid protest.

"Charmion, I am not taking his part. I think he was contemptible beyond words; but—*isn't* it possible that he has regretted, that he has not taken the money because he was *ashamed*?"

"Possible, of course; but I should say extremely improbable. However, I am no longer concerned in his motives. He gave up his liberty for a certain price, and the price is his. The money accumulates at the bank. Some day, no doubt, he will find it convenient to draw it."

I felt a movement of revolt, and cried quickly:—

"There is one person I despise even more than the man himself, and that is the creature who kept that letter, and sent it to you too late to prevent the marriage! If it were to be done at all, why could it not have been done before?"

Her lips curved.

"Yes. It was very cruel. That was another disillusion, Evelyn. I have always been convinced that Marjorie was the sender. Probably the letter had been written to her brother, or to some near relation, and in some way had come into her possession. She behaved very strangely about our engagement. But I had been her friend—how

she could find it in her heart! If there had been any possibility of doubt I would have gone straight to her, and demanded the truth, but—what was the use? The letter was *there*. I should only have brought more suffering upon myself. She wanted him for herself, and could not forgive me for taking him away; but if she had come to me at the beginning, when she saw how things might go, I should have gone away myself and left the coast clear. Even if it hurt myself, I should have been loyal to another woman who had *cared first*! Even now I have done my best for her. I offered, through my lawyers, to make no objection if he chose to free himself legally. It *could* be done in America, you know. I explained that it would make no difference to the settlement. That was made, and should remain unchanged!”

I looked at her sharply, for the sneer in her voice hurt me more than the pain.

“Charmion! Forgive me, dearest. You have been cruelly treated, but—don’t be vexed—aren’t you in the wrong, too, in feeling so bitter after all these years?”

To my surprise she assented instantly.

“Oh, yes; very wrong. More wrong than they, perhaps, for I have had so long to think; and what they did was done on an impulse. Don’t think I excuse myself, Evelyn. I don’t! I see quite well how hard and bitter I am, but——”

"You can't forgive?"

She hesitated, her grey eyes gazing into space.

"What exactly *is* forgiveness? If by lifting a little finger I could make him suffer as he has made me, nothing would induce me to do it. If by lifting a little finger I could bring him happiness and success, I think—no, I am *sure* that I would not hesitate. But to purge my heart of bitterness, that is beyond me! It's always there, deep down, a hard, hard wall, hiding the light, shutting me out from man—and from God!"

The last words came in a whisper. I knew the effort with which they were spoken, and sat silent, clinging to her hand. What could I say? I, with my easy, sunshiny life; how dared I dictate to her great grief. And yet I knew—I knew only in one way could peace come back.

The remembrance of the Vicar's first sermon came back to my heart like a breath of fresh air.

"Forgetting the things that are behind!" I said softly. "Couldn't you try that, Charmion? Forgetting, and—pressing forward! If forgiving seems beyond you for the moment, couldn't you take the first step?"

For the first time since she entered the room her face lightened into something like her own natural smile.

"Ah, Evelyn, that's like you! Thank you, dear, for the reminder. That was the text on our first

Sunday here. There is one thing I would like you to know. *You* have helped me more than anything else. You attracted me because you possess to excess the very qualities which I have lost—trust, faith, overflowing kindness and love. It has been a tonic to be with you. There have been times—working in the garden by your side, seeing all the live green things springing out of darkness—when I’ve been happy again, better than happy—*at peace!* But now—this upheaval—it has renewed it all. Evelyn, do you think she suspected? Do you think she will talk?”

“I am sure she won’t. Absolutely sure. She had not a flickering doubt. The name is different, you see, and she is too much absorbed in herself and her own affairs to waste any thought upon us. In a few days they sail for India.”

“Yes.” She drew a sigh of relief. “That’s good. I’m thankful. It would have been so hard to be uprooted again. But you can understand, Evelyn, that for a time——” She rose, stretched herself to her full height, and threw out her arms restlessly. “The roving fit is on me. I must be off into the wilds and fight it out by myself.”

I had known it was coming—subconsciously had known it for weeks, but it was hard all the same. We had been so happy, and in six short months my roots seemed to have gone down surprisingly deep. I hated the idea of leaving “Pastimes,” but

I reminded myself that it was only for a time—only for a time.

“*Of course,*” Charmion assured me heartily. “It is August now. We will make a rendezvous for Christmas. Perhaps I may turn up before that, like a bad penny, but you may depend on me for Christmas. You—you will go to your flat, Evelyn?”

I nodded silently. The Pixie scheme had for the moment lost its charm, but I would not give in.

“Silly one!” murmured Charmion fondly. “You dear goose! Well, good luck to you. May you make other people as happy as you have made me.”

CHAPTER XIV

A YOUNG WIFE'S DILEMMA

NOT another word about herself did Charmion say, but she began at once to make preparations for going abroad, and before a week is over she will be off. She has friends in Italy, it appears, and will probably spend some time near them, but even I am only to have an official address, from which letters are to be forwarded. She warns me that I may hear very seldom, since when a "dark mood" is on, the very essence of a cure seems to be to hide herself in utter solitude.

Well, I also am going to hide, and to shelter myself behind an official address, so I ought not to complain; but all the same I do feel lorn and lone. First Kathie torn away to another continent, and now Charmion, who is so wonderfully dear! The next thing will be that Bridget will announce, some fine morning, that she is going to marry the gardener! I told her so, in a moment of dejection, and she petrified me by replying calmly:—

"Indeed, and he's been after pestering me to do
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it since the moment we set foot. There's a deal worse things I might do!"

"*Bridget!*" I gasped; and I lay back in my chair. I had spoken in the most absolute unbelief. There were no illusions between Bridget and me, each knew the other's age to an hour, and Queen Anne herself had not seemed to me more dead to romance than my staid maid. I stared at her broad, worn face, her broad, elderly figure in a petrified surprise.

"Bridget, do you really mean—do you honestly mean that you like him, too?"

She simpered like any bit of a girl.

"And why wouldn't I be liking him, Miss Evelyn? Isn't he the fine figure of a man, and as pleasant a way with him as if he'd been Irish himself?"

"But, Bridget, you're forty-five! Do women—can women—is it possible to—to *care* at forty-five?"

Bridget chuckled; not a bit offended, but simply amused and superior.

"What's forty-foive, but the proime of life? *Care*—are you asking? 'Deed, it's not forty-five that's going to see a heart frozen stiff. Ye mind me of the old dame of eighty, who was asked what was the age when a woman stopped caring about a man. 'Deed,' says she, 'I can't tell ye that. You'll have to be asking someone older than me!'"

She laughed again, and I took my turn at looking superior.

"Then, of course, under the circumstances, you will not be inclined to come with me to town?"

"Deed, and I will then. I'd rather be with you than any man that walks. And besides," added Bridget shrewdly, "won't he be all the keener for doing without me a bit?"

I jumped up and marched out of the room, feeling jarred and irritated, and utterly out of sympathy. That's the worst of being a spinster, you can never count on your companions as a continuance! Kathie left me at the invitation of a man she had known a few months; Charmion regards me as a narcotic to distract her thoughts from another man, and flies off the moment his memory becomes troublesome; and now even Bridget! Men are a nuisance. They upset everything.

I've come to the vicarage. When Delphine heard of our departure from "Pastimes" she developed a sudden and violent desire to have me for a visitor for a short time before I left. She is nervy and depressed ("tired out after her hard work!" the dear Vicar translates it), and has got it into her head that my society is the one and only thing that can set her right. It is flattering, and convenient into the bargain, for we are lending "Pastimes" to the widow of a poor clergyman, and it will be a help to her to have me at hand until she has settled down. It seemed a waste of good things to leave the house

empty through all the lovely autumn months. This poor soul is delighted to come; we are delighted to have her; the cook and housemaid are—*resigned* to the change of mistress; more one cannot expect.

I've been here a week, and am already endorsing the theory that you can never really know a person until you have lived together beneath the same roof. Before I came, I thought the Vicar as nearly perfect a husband as a man could be, and Delphine about as unsatisfactory a wife. Now, after studying them for one short week, I have modified both opinions. She is a lovable, warm-hearted, well-meaning, weak, vain, dissatisfied child! He is a very fine, a very noble, a very blind, and irritatingly inconsiderate man! On Wednesday he ordered dinner an hour earlier for his own convenience, and he never came home at all. On Friday he said he would be out all day, and walked in at one o'clock, bringing three visitors in his train, demanding a hot lunch. He also, it appears, is difficult about money, which is not in any sense meant to imply that he is mean, but simply that he wishes to give away as much as possible to other people, and to deny his own household in order to be able to do it. I was in the room one day when Delphine presented the monthly bills, and his face was a network of worry and depression. The grocer's book was not included;

he asked for it, and said it had been missing some time. Delphine prevaricated. I knew as well as if I'd been told that she was afraid to show it!

After he had gone out her mood changed. She lifted the little red books from the table, flung them one after the other to the ceiling, caught them with an agile hand, and sent them spinning into the corner of the room. This done, she danced round the table, came to a standstill in front of my chair, and defiantly snapped her fingers.

"I—don't—care! I don't care a snap! I've done my best, and now I shan't worry any more. It isn't as if it were necessary. He could allow me more if he chose. Why should a man stint his wife to give the money away to outsiders? Charity begins at home. He expects me to manage on a pittance, yet there must always be plenty of everything—soup to send at a moment's notice to anyone who is ill, puddings and jellies. And all the stupid old bores coming to meals. Could *you* keep house for this household on——"

I was startled at the smallness of the sum she mentioned; horrified when I contrasted it with our own bills at "Pastimes".

"My dear—no! My opinion of you has gone up by leaps and bounds if you can keep anywhere near that. You manage wonderfully. I had no idea you were so clever!"

"Oh, well!" she said uncomfortably. "Oh,

well, perhaps not so clever as you think. One gets tired of struggling after the impossible. In for a penny, in for a pound ! Life is too short to worry oneself over halfpennies. I shall tell the men to send in the books quarterly after this. I'm tired of being hectored every month. Better get it over in one big dose."

I thought of the Vicar's pensive "Darling, isn't this very high?" and laughed at the idea of "hectoring"; but the quarterly bills seemed a dangerous remedy.

"Won't your husband object? Men hate bills to run on."

"Oh!" she waved a complacent hand, "I'll put him off. He'll remember every now and then, and then it will float out of his mind. It's always an effort to Jacky to come down to mundane things. Evelyn, be warned by me, and never, never marry an unworldly man. It's impossible to live with them with any peace or comfort."

"Well, if I do, I'll see to it that he is worldly enough to understand household bills. I'll keep house for a month within his own limits, and let him see how he likes the fare."

Delphine stared.

"Jacky wouldn't mind. So long as there was enough to give away, he'd eat cold meat, and mashed potatoes, and contentment withal, every day of the week, and never complain. I should punish myself,

not him, Evelyn." She subsided on the floor at my feet, laid her hands on my knee, and lifted her flushed, childish face to mine. Such a delicate rose-leaf of a face, more like a child's than that of a grown-up woman. "Now that you've stayed here, and seen for yourself what it's like, truthfully, aren't you just a little sorry for me? Week after week, month after month, always the same routine of meeting and parish work, and keeping house. It is Jacky's work—his vocation; but for me, a girl of twenty-two, do you think it is quite *fair*?"

"I don't think you ought to ask me such questions. I would rather not interfere," I said feebly. I knew it was feeble, but it is a very, very delicate business to interfere between husband and wife, and moreover the blame seemed fairly evenly divided. The Vicar had undoubtedly made a mistake in marrying a young girl for her beauty and charm, without considering if she were a true helpmeet for his life's work. Delphine had undoubtedly made a mistake in "never thinking" of her future as a clergyman's wife; and now he was blindly expecting a miraculous transformation of the butterfly into a drone, while the butterfly was poisoning her wings, impatient for flight. I sat silent, and Delphine said pettishly:—

"I don't ask you to interfere. Only to sympathise. Is this a life for a girl of my age?"

"It depends entirely upon the girl and her ideas of 'life'. Some girls would——"

"What?"

"Love what you call 'parish'. Find in it her greatest interest."

She stared at me, the colour slowly mounting to her face. Her voice dropped to a whisper.

"Yes, I know. If I were good, and really cared! Evelyn, I am going to confess something dreadful. At home, when I had no responsibility, I cared far more than I do now. I thought it would be the other way about, but the feeling that I *must* do things, *must* go to meetings and committees, *must* go to church for all the services, makes me feel that I'd rather not! I daren't say so to Jacky. He'd be so grieved. I'm grieved myself. I daren't tell anyone but you. Do you think any clergyman's wife ever felt the same before?"

I laughed.

"I'm sure of it! Thousands of them. It's not right to expect a clergyman's wife to be an unpaid curate—plus a housekeeper, and it needs special grace to stand a succession of committees. How would it be to drop some of the most boring duties and concentrate upon the things that you could do with all your heart? You'd be happier, and would do more good!"

"Do you think I should?" She clutched eagerly at the suggestion. "Really, I believe you are right. As you say, I have not the strength to play the part of an unpaid curate."

But that misquotation roused me, and I contradicted her sharply.

"Excuse me! I said nothing of the sort. You are strong enough to do anything you chose. It is not strength that is wanting, but——"

"Go on! You might as well finish, now you've begun. But what?"

"*Love!*"

She gave a little gasp of astonishment.

"Love! For whom?"

"Your neighbours. Your husband. God!"

"Oh, if *you* are going to preach next!" she cried impatiently. She jumped up from her seat, whirled round, and flounced from the room.

Mr. Maplestone came in to tea. He is quite a frequent visitor here I find. Besides the fact that he is a vicar's churchwarden, it appears that he has known Delphine since she was a child, so that he is absolutely at home with her, and evidently very fond of her, too, in a cousinly, elder-brotherly, absolutely matter-of-fact way. The first time I saw him was quite early one morning when, hearing unusual sounds of merriment from the dining-room, I opened the door, and beheld the Vicar seated in an arm-chair, looking on with much amusement, while the Squire held a box of chocolates in one upraised hand, and Delphine capered round him, snatching, and leaping into the air like an excited little dog. It was a festive little scene until my head

came peeping round the corner of the door, and then the fun collapsed like the pricking of a bubble. The Squire's face fell, likewise his hand; he jerked stiffly to attention, stiffly handed over the chocolates, stiffly bowed to me, stared at my uncovered head.

"Oh, I didn't tell you! Evelyn is staying here for a fortnight before going away."

He mumbled. I mumbled. The Vicar rose from his seat and made for the door.

"Well, we shall see you to lunch to-morrow, Ralph. I have several points to discuss. Delphine, we shall meet at the Parish Room at twelve?"

"Oh! That committee? I suppose so," Delphine said ungraciously. She tore open her box, helped herself to the largest chocolate in the centre row, and offered me the next choice. Ralph Maplestone took up his hat.

"Oh, for goodness sake, don't you run away, too! *You* haven't a committee. There are heaps of things I want to say still. Ralph"—she went to his side and stared eagerly in his face—"did you mean what you said the other day, about teaching me to ride?"

"Why not?" he said easily. "If you'd care about it, I'd be only too glad. Bess would carry you well, and she's as safe as a house. You could come up and practise in the park. If I were busy, Jevons could take you round. He'd teach you quite as well, or better, than I should myself."

"Oh!"—she beamed at him, a picture of happiness—"it will be fine! I've always longed to ride. And afterwards, when I'm quite good—I feel it in my bones that I *shall* be good—will you still——"

He laughed good-naturedly. He is extraordinarily good-natured to Delphine.

"Lend you Bess? Certainly. As often as you like. Do her good to have the exercise."

"And when I'm *very* good—very good indeed—will you——"

He shook his head.

"Ah, hunting is a different matter. Rather a responsibility. What? We must see what John says. In the meantime, you'll get a habit?"

"Yes." She glanced at me quickly, and glanced away. "Where shall I go? Would Matthews——"

Matthews was the local tailor. The Squire waved aside the suggestion with masculine scorn.

"Certainly not. Do the thing properly when you are about it. Nothing worse than a badly-cut habit. Better go up to town!"

Again Delphine glanced at me. The obvious thing was for me to return her invitation and invite her to stay with me for the transaction, but obviously I couldn't do it. Moreover I did not *want* to, so I stared blankly before me, and resigned myself to being thought a mean thing.

"Oh, well—I'll manage somehow," Delphine said

in a tone of finality, which was obviously intended to stop the discussion.

Mr. Maplestone looked at me and said :—

“Mrs. Fane has already left, I believe. I suppose you will join her later.”

“I think not. She has gone abroad. I shall remain in England.”

Delphine gave a short, irritable laugh. I had annoyed her, and childlike, she wished to hit back.

“Abroad, and England! That’s all the address we are vouchsafed. Mrs. Fane and Miss Wastneys evidently wish to shake off the dust of this village as soon as they drive away from “Pastimes”. Even if we wish to communicate with them, we shall not be able to do it.”

“Oh, yes, Delphine, you will,” I contradicted. “I have told you that letters will always reach us through our lawyers.”

“Lawyers!” she repeated eloquently. “As if one could send ordinary letters in a roundabout way like that! I wouldn’t dare to write through a lawyer, unless it were a matter of life and death. I must say, Evelyn, you are queer! When we have got to know each other so well, too!”

“You thought it ‘queer’ that Charmion and I should live here together; and now you think it ‘queer’ when we go away. Isn’t that a little unreasonable?”

"It is 'queer' to be so mysterious about where you are going. People ordinarily——"

"Very well, then! We are *not* ordinary. Let us leave it at that. It is much more interesting to be mysterious. Perhaps we are really two authors of world-wide fame, who bury ourselves in the country for a short rest now and then between our dazzling spells of industry."

Delphine gaped, hesitated, then laughed complacently.

"Oh, well, Mrs. Fane is the sort of person who might be *anything*. But not you, Evelyn; certainly not you! You are not——"

"What?"

"Clever enough!" she cried bluntly. The next minute, with one of the swift, childlike impulses which made her so lovable, she threw her arms round my neck and kissed me vehemently. "But you are good—good and kind. That's better than all the cleverness. Forgive me, Evelyn; I'm a rude, bad-tempered thing. Kiss and be friends!"

Ralph Maplestone seized his hat and marched out of the room.

CHAPTER XV

A STARTLING PROPOSAL OF MARRIAGE

THIS afternoon the Squire, in his capacity of churchwarden, spent an hour with the Vicar in his study, and then joined us for tea on the lawn. It was a hot, airless, summer afternoon, and we were all rather silent and disinclined to eat, and I felt my eyes wandering to the big grey car which stood waiting outside the gate and wishing—many things!

I wished that I had a car of my own. I wished I had my dear old Dinah, on whose back I had been wont to roam the country-side. So long as Charmion and the garden had absorbed my attention I had been contented enough, but now an overwhelming restlessness seized me. I was tired of the slow movement of my own feet. I longed to move quickly, to feel the refreshing rush of air on my cheeks once more. I wished the woman-hating, unappreciative Ralph Maplestone, had been a kind, considerate, understanding, put-your-self-in-her-place sort of

man, who would have offered his time, and his car, and his services as chauffeur.

“Delphine, would you like to have a run in the car for a couple of hours or so before dinner?”

We jumped on our chairs, Delphine and I, automatically, like marionettes, the one from pleasure, the other from surprise. Had he seen? Had he noticed? The light blue eyes stared coolly ahead. For pure callous indifference their expression could not have been beaten. Coincidence! Nothing more.

“Oh, Ralph, you dear! How angelic of you! I should love it of all things. It’s so close and stuffy in this garden. It will be perfectly delicious to have a blow. Which way shall we go?”

“If you are not in a hurry we might get as far as the ponds.” He paused, frowned, glanced hesitatingly towards me. “Perhaps Miss Wastneys—— Is there any special place you would like to see?”

“Dearest!” the Vicar’s voice broke gently into the conversation, “I’m sorry, but was not it this afternoon you arranged to meet Mrs. Rawlins at the ‘Hall,’ to discuss the new coverings for the library books? I think you said half-past five. It is nearly five now. You would not have time.”

“I can send down word that I can’t come. I’ll meet her to-morrow at the same time.”

“I think not.” The Vicar’s face set; his voice did not lose its gentle tone, but it was full of deci-

sion. "I think not. Mrs. Rawlins is a busy woman, and she has a long distance to come. You would not wish to inconvenience her for the sake of a trifling pleasure!"

Delphine gave him a look, the look of a thwarted child, flushed to the roots of her hair, and turned hastily aside. Open rebellion was useless, but it spoke in every line of her body, every movement of the small, graceful head. I was sorry for her, for being young and feminine myself, I could understand how dull was the claim of linen covers for injured bindings, compared with that swift, exhilarating rush. I looked at the Vicar, and began pleadingly, "Couldn't I——"; then the Squire looked at me, pulled out his watch, and said sharply:—

"Ten minutes to five. Hurry up, Delphine! If you put on your hat at once you can have half an hour. It will freshen you up for your duties. I'll land you at the 'Hall,' and"—he switched his eyes on me with a keen, gimlet-like glance—"take Miss Wastneys a little further while you are engaged."

I blinked, but did not speak; Delphine frowned; the Vicar said happily, "That will do well. That will do very well! Now, darling, we shall all be pleased!"

Deluded man! Two less-pleased-looking females it would have been difficult to find, as we made our way to the house, and up the narrow, twisting staircase. Delphine was injured at the prospective

shortness of her drive ; I was appalled at the length of mine. Why had he asked me ? Why hadn't I refused, and what—oh ! what should we ever find to say ?

“ It's always 'the same thing ; if a bit of pleasure comes along, there's bound to be a committee meeting in the way ! Half an hour ! Pleased, indeed ! I've always been longing for Ralph to take me drives, and now that he has been disappointed like this, the very first time, is he likely to try again ? Of course, Evelyn ” (tardy sense of hospitality !), “ I am glad for you to have the change. It's awfully good of him.”

“ Quite heroic, isn't it ? ” I said tartly, as I turned into my room. No doubt the poor man was disappointed, but she need not have rubbed it in ! I leave it to psychologists to decide whether or no there was any connection between my natural annoyance at the slight, and the fact that I went to the trouble of opening a special box in order to put on my best and newest motor bonnet and coat ; but there it is, I did do it, and they were all the more becoming for the accompaniment of flushed cheeks and extra bright eyes. The colour was a soft dove grey, the bonnet a delicious concoction of drawn silk, which looked as if it had begun life meaning to adorn a Quaker's head, and had then suddenly succumbed to the fascinations of a pink lining and a wreath of tiny pink roses. When Delphine came into the

room a moment later, she stopped short on the threshold, and gasped with astonishment.

“Goodness!” Her face flushed, she stared with wide, bright eyes; admiring, critical, disapproving, all at once. “Evelyn, what a get up! I never saw anything like it. You look—you look——”

“Well! How do I look?”

There was an edge in my voice. She felt it, and softened at once, in her quick lovable fashion.

“You look a duck! Sim—ply a duck. But, my dear, it’s too good! Why waste it here? Any old thing will do for these lanes. There’s time to change!”

“I don’t intend to change,” I said obstinately, and at that very moment there sounded an imperious whistle from below. Without another word we marched downstairs and out to the front gate, where the two men stood waiting beside the car. Automatically their eyes rolled towards my bonnet; the Vicar smiled, and bent his head in a courtly little bow, which said much without the banality of words. The Squire had no expression! Whether he approved, disapproved, or furiously disliked, he remained insoluble as the Sphinx. Oh, some day—somehow—some one—I hope, will wake him into life, and whoever she is, may she shake him well up, and ride rough-shod over him for a long, long time before she gives in! He *needs* taking down!

After a faint—very faint—protest, Delphine took

her seat in front, while I sat in solitary state inside, leaning back against the cushions with an outward appearance of ease, but inwardly uncomfortably conscious of a heart which beat more quickly than necessary. This was all very well, but what next? What was to happen when the half hour was up, and Delphine went off to her library books and left us alone?

Could I sit still where I was? It would seem absurd, not to say discourteous. Would he ask me to change seats? Would he expect me to suggest it? Suppose he did? Suppose he didn't? And when we were settled, what should I find to say? My mind mentally rehearsed possible openings. "How beautiful the country is looking." "English villages are so charming." "How was the General when you saw him last?" On and on like a whirlingig went the silly, futile thoughts, while before me the two heads wagged, and nodded, and tossed, and a laughing conversation was kept up with apparently equal enjoyment on both sides. Delphine had a child's capacity for enjoying the present; even when the car pulled up and she alighted before the door of the "Parish Hall," the smile was still on her face. The little treat had blown away the cobwebs; she was refreshed and ready, if not precisely anxious, for work.

"Thanks awfully, Ralph. That was as good as a hundred tonics! I do think a car is a glorious

possession." Then she looked at me and nodded encouragingly. "Now it is your turn! It's ever so much more fun in front. Ralph will be quite proud of sitting beside your bonnet!"

So after all neither of us said it, and I should never have the satisfaction of knowing if he had meant——

He opened the door, and I meekly got out and took the other seat. What was the use of making a fuss? Delphine disappeared behind the oak door, the engines whirled, and we were off again, steaming out of the village, and down the sloping road which led to the lovely sweep of the heath, the speed steadily increasing, until we were travelling at a good forty miles an hour. Four milestones flashed past before either of us spoke a word; then in desperation I made a beginning.

"She needs change, doesn't she? It's quite touching to see how it cheers her up."

"She?" he repeated. "Who?" He turned his eyes on me as he spoke, and they were absolutely, genuinely blank. Astounding as it appeared, he really did not know.

"Delphine, of course! Who else could I mean?"

"Oh—h. Yes, I had forgotten all about her."

He might have been talking of a fly that for a moment had buzzed by his side. The cruel indifference of his manner stung me into quick retort.

"Yet you seemed very kind—you *were* very kind

to her a few minutes ago. Do you always forget so quickly?"

A movement of his hand reduced the speed of the engine. We had left the village far behind, and the wide high road stretched before us like a brown ribbon, sloping gently up and down the grassy slopes. For miles ahead there was not a soul in view. Ralph Maplestone stared at me and I stared back at him. Seen close at hand, his plain face had an attraction of its own. It looked strong and honest; its tints were all fresh and clean, speaking of a healthy, out-of-door life. No little child had ever clearer eyes. They didn't look so stern as I had believed.

"What have I to remember? Delphine came for a drive; I'm glad she enjoyed it, but it is over. Why should I think of her any more?"

"Oh, no reason at all!" I said testily. I felt testy, as if from a personal injury. "Only when one has a friend, it is agreeable to believe that out of sight is not immediately out of mind. But, of course, I am a woman. Women's memories are proverbially longer than men's."

The speed slackened still further. Now we were rumbling along at a speed which made conversation easy. The blue eyes gave me another keen glance.

"Women burden their memories with a thousand trivialities. Men brush them aside, and keep to the

few that count. In the big things of life they are less forgetful than women!"

I smiled, a slow, superior smile, and spoke in a forbearing voice:—

"Do you think you—er—*really* understand very much about women?"

"No—I don't. How can I? I don't know any," he replied bluntly, and the answer was so surprisingly, illogically different from what I expected, that involuntarily I laughed, and went on laughing while he stammered and tried to explain.

"Of course I have my opinion—every fellow has. One has eyes. One can't go through life without *seeing*. But, personally, it's quite true. I *don't* know any. Never have done!"

"Your mother?"

"You would think so, but we are too much alike—tongue-tied—can't say what we feel. She is more at home with my sister, who chatters from morning till night, and has no reticences, no susceptibilities. We care for each other; to a point we are good friends, but beyond that—strangers."

I didn't laugh any more.

"Your sister, then. Don't you two——?"

"No. She was educated abroad. She married the year she came out. She lives in Scotland. Nominally we are brother and sister; actually the merest acquaintances. She's a nice girl—generous, affectionate. But we don't touch."

“Delphine?”

“That child!” His shoulders moved with a gesture of dismissal, as if the suggestion was too absurd for discussion. Poor Delphine, how her vanity would have suffered if she had been there at the moment! I suppose my face was expressive, for he added in quick explanation: “She’s a nice child. I’m fond of her, but she is still waiting to grow up. It’s perfectly true, Miss Wastneys, I know no women. They have been a sealed book to me.”

I was sorry for the big lonely thing. It must be hard to be born with a temperament which keeps one closed, as it were, within iron doors, while all the time the poor hungry soul longs to get out. I felt glad that I was made the other way round. At the same time it seemed a good opportunity to put in a word for my own sex. I straightened my back, and tried to look solemn and elderly. I spoke in deep, impressive tones:—

“Mr. Maplestone, I’m sorry, but you are illogical. You acknowledge that this is a subject about which you know nothing, yet almost in the same breath you criticise and condemn. Men blame women for having no sense of justice, but they are just as bad. They are worse, and with less excuse. Women’s perceptions are so keen that they see every side of a situation, so it happens sometimes that they get confused, and appear contradictory. Men are so

blind that they only see *one* side—their own side—and in utter ignorance of all the others they proceed to lay down the law. For my part, I prefer the woman's standpoint."

Such a blankly amazed face stared into mine! The blue eyes widened, a glimpse of strong white teeth showed between the parted lips. He gaped like a child, and said vaguely:—

"Yes, but—I don't understand! That may all be quite true, but what on earth has it got to do with what we were talking of last?"

I bridled. Nothing on earth is more exasperating than to enlarge on one's own pet theories, and then to find that they have fallen flat. I made my voice as chilling as possible.

"To me the connection seems obvious."

"Sorry. My stupidity, I suppose. I fail to grasp it. Will you explain?"

"You said that Delphine was not a woman. If that is so, it's her husband's fault—and yours! And every other man's with whom she comes in contact. You all treat her like a child, and expect her to behave as a child, and then turn round and abuse her because she dances to your tune."

"Excuse me. Who abuses her?"

"You did. You said——"

"I said she was a charming child of whom I was very fond. Is that abuse?"

"In the—er—the connection in which you used

it—in the way in which you said it, and meant it, and avoided saying something else—yes, it is.”

For a moment he looked as if he were going to laugh, then met my eyes, thought better of it, and grunted instead.

“Sorry. Again I don’t quite follow. But no doubt it is my illogical mind. I should be interested to know in what way you hold me responsible for Delphine’s shortcomings?”

“I have just told you. You treat her as a child who must be fed on sweetmeats, and bribed with treats and diversions; conversationally you talk down to her level. It never occurs to you to expect her to be in earnest about any one thing.”

“Well?”

“Well! Isn’t that enough? Can’t you see how such an attitude must affect her character and development?”

“No, I can’t. To my mind it wouldn’t matter what the whole world thought. For good or ill, I stand for myself. What other people happened to think about me wouldn’t affect me one jot.”

I said loftily:—

“You are a man. Women are different. We *do* care. We *are* affected. That’s why it is so dreadfully important that we should be understood. I know it by experience. In different surroundings, with different people, I myself am two or three totally different women——”

He asked no questions, but looked at me, silent, expectant, and lured by that fatal love of talking about oneself which exists in so many feminine hearts, I fell into the trap, and prattled thoughtlessly on :—

“At home with my younger sister, I was the one who had all the responsibility and management. She depended on me. I was the Autocrat of the Household, and everything I said was law.”

“You would like that?”

I gave him a withering glance.

“Pray what makes you think so?”

“You like your own way, don’t you? I—er—I have received that impression.”

“I was about to add,” I said coldly, “that, since I have lived at ‘Pastimes,’ I have not had my own way at all. I have not wanted it. Mrs. Fane’s character is stronger than mine. I have been content to abdicate in her favour. If you asked her opinion of me, she would probably tell you that I was too pliable—too easily influenced.”

Silence. The blunt, roughly-hewn profile stared stolidly ahead. A granite wall would have shown as much expression. I was seized with an immense, a devastating curiosity to discover what he was thinking. I fixed my eyes steadily upon him, mentally willing him to turn round.

He knew I was doing it. I could see the red rise above his collar rim, and mount steadily to his ears.

He was determined that he would not speak. I was equally determined that he should.

“Mr. Maplestone! I am waiting for a remark.”

“Miss Wastneys, I—er—I have no remark to make.”

“You don’t recognise me in the latter *rôle*?”

“I—er—I can’t say that I do! On the few occasions on which we have met, you have appeared to me to be abundantly—er—to be, in short, the ruling spirit.”

I thought of that first interview in the inn when the brunt of the bargaining had fallen on me; I thought of the tragic evening at the “Hall,” when I had arranged a hurried departure, without apparently consulting Charmion’s wishes. Appearances were against me, and it was impossible to explain them away. I said, in a cross, hurt voice:—

“Oh, of course, you think me everything that is disagreeable and domineering. It is just as I said—men see only one thing, and it colours their whole view. If I lived a lifetime of meekness and self-abnegation, you would never forget that affair of the lease. And it was your own fault, too! You were the unreasonable one, not I; but all the same, you have never forgiven. Delphine told me how much you disliked me.”

His eyes met mine, frankly, without a flicker of shame.

"Did she? That was wrong of her. She had no business to repeat——"

"You acknowledge it, then! You *did* say so?"

"I did. Oh, yes. It's quite true."

It was a shock. At that moment I realised that, in my vanity, I had never really believed Delphine's statement. The Squire had made some casual remark which she had misunderstood, misquoted——such had been the subconscious explanation with which I had assuaged my complacency; but now out of his own lips, openly, unhesitatingly, the verdict was confirmed! I felt as if a pail of water had been emptied over my head.

"And you—you really meant——"

"If I had not meant it, I should hardly have said——"

"I can't think why! What had I done? If it was that affair of the lease——"

"It was not. I was amazed at the time, but I got over that. It was just——"

"What?"

"It is difficult to say. It's not an easy subject to discuss. Need we go on?"

"I think so. I think it is my right. In justice to myself, I think you ought to tell me how I have made myself so disagreeable. It might be useful to me in the future!"

For all answer he steered the car to the side of the road, brought it to a standstill, and descended

from his seat. There was an air of deliberation about the proceeding which sent a shiver down my spine. The inference was that the enumeration of my faults was so lengthy a business that it could not be undertaken by a man who had other work in hand. I sat in nervous fascination, watching him slowly cross to my side of the car, lean forward, and place both hands on the screen. His face was quite close to mine. It looked suddenly white and tense. He opened his lips and spoke:—

“Evelyn, will you be my wife?”

If I live to be a hundred, never—no, never shall I forget the electric shock of that moment! To be prepared to listen to a lecture on one's faults and failings, and to hear in its place a proposal of marriage—could anything be more paralysing? And to have it hurled at one with no warning, no preliminary “leading up,” and from Ralph Maplestone of all people—the most reserved, the most unsusceptible, the most woman-hating of mankind! I sat petrified, unable to move or to speak, unable to do anything but stare, and stare, and stare, and listen with incredulous ears to a string of passionate protestations. Half of what he said was lost in the dazed bewilderment of the moment, but what I *did* hear, went something like this:—

“You are the first woman—the only woman. Before you came I was content. Since we met, I have been in torment. You woke me up. When

a man is roused from a trance it gives him pain. You brought pain to me—sleeplessness, discontent, a craving that grew and grew. I wished we had never met—you had upset my life; I believed that I hated you for it. Delphine questioned me. It was then I told her that I disliked you. I meant it—I *thought* I meant it! I longed for you to disappear and leave me in peace, yet all the time I thought of you more and more. Your smile! Whenever we met, you smiled, and the remembrance of it followed me home. Wherever I went your face haunted me. I planned to go away, to travel, to break myself loose; but it was no use, I could not go. I dreaded to see you, but I dreaded more to go away. I hung about the places you might pass. That dress with the flounces! I could see the blue of it coming toward me through the branches. That night you were ill! All the colour went out of your cheeks. I would have given my life—my life! I have never loved before. I did not know what love meant, but you have taught me. You have waked me from sleep. I'm not good enough—a surly brute! Couldn't expect any girl to care; but for seven years—twice seven years—I'd serve, I'd wait. Oh, my beautiful, my beautiful—if you could see yourself! How can I stay here, and let you go? Marry me! Marry me! This week, to-morrow—what are conventions to us? I'll be good to you. All the love of my life is waiting—I've never squandered

it away. It has been stored up in my heart for you."

I held up my hand, imploring him to stop.

"Oh, Mr. Maplestone, don't! It's all a mistake. It must be! How can you care? You know so little of me; we have met so seldom. How can you possibly know that you would like me as a wife?"

He gave a quick, excited laugh.

"It's all true what those poet fellows write about love! I used to laugh and call it nonsense; but when it comes to one's own turn, it's the truest thing in the whole world! How do I know? I can't tell you, Evelyn; but I *do* know. It's just the one certain fact in life. I want you! I'm going to have you!"

He stretched out his arms as if to seize me then and there, and I shrank back, looking, I suppose, as I felt, frightened to death, for instantly his manner changed, his arms dropped to his side, and he cried in the gentlest, softest of tones:—

"Don't be frightened of me! Don't be frightened! Forgive me if I seem rough. Rough to *you*! Oh, my sweet, give me a chance to show what I could be! You have done enough caring for other people; now let me take care of you! Be my wife, *Evelyn*!"

It was all too painful and miserable, and—yes, too beautiful to put into words. I cried, and said, No! no! I was sorry, but I didn't love him; I had

never thought. There was no one else—oh, no; but it was hopeless all the same. I could never—never—— Oh, indeed, I was not worth being miserable about. He must forget me. On Wednesday I was going away. He would find when I was not there that he would soon forget.

He looked at me with sad, stern eyes.

“That’s not true! You know it’s not true. I am not the sort to forget. And if there is no one else, why should I try? Evelyn, you don’t know me, if you think one ‘no’ will put me off. I said I would wait seven years, and I meant what I said. If you go away, I shall follow. What’s this nonsense of leaving no address? Do you imagine, if I choose to look for you, you can hide yourself from ME?”

He looked so big and masterful that for a moment I felt a qualm of doubt; then I comforted myself with the reflection that it would be impossible to discover what did not exist. For a period of time Evelyn Wastneys was about to disappear from the face of the earth. The spinster of the basement flat was about to take her place.

“I don’t love you! I don’t love you!” I repeated helplessly. “I have never once thought of you except as a—a rather cross, overbearing man who had taken a dislike to me at first sight. How can I turn round all in a moment and look upon you as a—a lover? And I have my friend and my work—and

we have just taken our house. I don't want to be married! I couldn't be married even if I cared!"

"You are going to be married. You are going to marry me! What is this 'work' of which you talk? A woman's work is to make a home, and to help a man to find his soul. Evelyn, do you imagine for one moment that I am going to let you go?"

He was himself again: self-confident, resolute, overbearing. I took refuge in silence, and argued no more.

"Have you enjoyed your drive?" Delphine asked. "Was Ralph civil? It was unfortunate that I had to leave you alone. Where did you buy your bonnet, Evelyn? I must get one like it for myself. Does your head ache, dear? You look quite pale."

I said it did. *Something* ached! It kept me awake all night with a dreary, heavy pain. I lay and thought, and thought, until my brain was in a whirl. Had I been to blame in the past? Honestly I could not see that I had. What was I to do in the future? Must I tell Charmion? How could I ever return to "Pastimes"? Round and round the questions whirled in a never-ending circle, but no solutions came. Then I said my prayers, with a special plea for guidance for a very lonely, very worried girl, and gradually, surely, I grew calmer. I reminded myself that there was no need to worry over the future; and that all I had to do for the moment was to decide

on my duty for to-morrow. For everybody's sake it appeared best that I should excuse myself to Delphine and escape to town, since nothing could be gained by another interview with Ralph Maplestone. I would send him a letter, repeating my protestations that I could never be his wife, and begging him to forget me with all possible speed. When he called at the Vicarage to answer it, he would find that the bird had fled.

The early morning sunlight was stealing in at the window. I closed my tired eyes and fell asleep.

CHAPTER XVI

A GLORIOUS THING

THE first day after taking possession of my flat, I paid a visit to a celebrated expert in theatrical "make up," and paid for his help and advice. It is not an easy thing for a young woman to transform herself into an old one, and I have a weakness for doing a thing well, when I set about it. He was a delightful man! I remember him with the liveliest appreciation. I was nervous and embarrassed, but in two minutes he put me at my ease. From his manner you would have supposed that my errand was as ordinary and conventional as buying a postage stamp, while his keenness, his cleverness, his professional zest were refreshing to behold. He stared at, and criticised my face, with as much impersonality as if it had been a picture on the wall.

"Always look for the predominant factor—the feature, or features, which give personality to the face. In your case they are undoubtedly the eyebrows and the curve of the upper lip. A few judicious touches to these will alter the whole expression to a surprising extent. A few more lines will give age. The wig and spectacles are the refuges

of the amateur. In themselves they can do little, but with the touches I suggest, and a deep-toned powder to darken the skin, your disguise will be complete. You shall see—you shall see!”

He motioned to a chair before a mirror, and set to work, explaining each detail as he went along. It was marvellous to see how beneath the sweep of a tiny brush my youth and good looks faded and disappeared! Then he made me wash it all off, and do the same thing for myself. Three times over the process was repeated before I “passed” to his satisfaction. To my relief he laughed at the idea of the india-rubber pads, and indeed they were no longer required, but he gave me a small appliance which could be used when I especially desired to alter my voice. Then he sent me to a woman expert, who designed a nice little pad to round my shoulders. I can’t say that it was exactly a hilarious afternoon!

And now a month has passed by. For a whole month Mary Harding has resolutely ignored Evelyn Wastneys, and devoted her time to the service of others. I was just going to say “her whole thought” also, but stopped short just in time. The plain truth is that the ignoring of Evelyn engrosses many thoughts. She is a regular Jack-in-the-box, who is no sooner shut in, than up bobs her head again, wailing miserably:—

“I’m lonely! I’m lonely! I want to go home!”

Then Mary, the aunt, snaps the lid more tightly

than ever, but through the chink a persistent whisper makes itself heard: "I'm lonely! I'm lonely! I want some one to think of ME!"

The flat is comfortable enough, and I am well served with Bridget as housekeeper, and a clean young orphan of seventeen to work under her and open the door. The orphan was procured as much as a safety-guard for myself, as an assistant to Bridget. In case anyone who knows me in my true *rôle* should by any possibility discover my hiding-place, and appear suddenly at the door, it is better to keep Bridget in the background, and as Emily knows me only in the character of aunt, I am necessarily kept up to the mark in the matter of disguise.

I wear elderly clothes, tinted spectacles, and a dowdy wig, and with a few touches alter the shape of my upper lip. That is all that is necessary for ordinary life. The cheek pads are reserved for occasions of special need! Emily considers me a "nice old lady, and young in my ways". She likewise confides to Bridget that she shouldn't wonder if I'd been quite good-looking in my day. Why did I never marry? Was it a disappointment like?

In outdoor dress especially I look genuinely middle-aged. Young women get up in the Tubes and offer me their seats! Volumes could say no more.

As regards my work, I have discovered that in London it is as difficult to get to know one's neigh-

bours as it is to avoid knowing them in the country. In my rustic ignorance I had imagined that all the inhabitants of the "Mansions" would be keenly interested in the advent of a new tenant, and curious about her personality. I imagined them talking together about me, and saying, "Have you seen the new lady in the basement? What does she look like? When shall you call?" but in reality no one cared a jot. There has been another removal since I came, and I overheard one or two comments in the hall. "Bother these removals. They make such a mess!" "Those tiresome vans block the way for my pram!" Not one word of interest in the removal itself! Not one word of inquiry as to the newcomers. So far as interest or sympathy went, each little shut-in-dwelling is as isolated as a lighthouse.

For the past few weeks I have been haunted by a vision of myself beating an ignominious retreat, after having altogether failed in my mission. To console myself I began a second course of Red Cross training, to revive what I had learnt two years before. Perhaps some day one of the tenants will be ill, or have an accident, which will give me a chance. Watching the stream of children coming in and out of the "Mansions," I almost found it in my heart to wish that one of them would tumble down and break, not his crown, but just some minor, innocent, little bone, so that his mother could behold how promptly and efficiently I could render first aid!

A month passed by—four long, lonely weeks. Not a line from Charmion. Not a line from Delphine. Not a line from the big, blustering lover who had vowed never, no, never, to give up the pursuit. With one and all, out of sight was apparently out of mind, and I am the sort of woman who needs to be remembered and appreciated, and who feels reduced to the lowest ebb when nobody takes any notice. I wondered what Charmion was doing, I wondered how Delphine was faring, I wondered—did he really care so much? Would he go on caring? Suppose I had cared, too? Then another long, lonely day came to an end, and I crawled into bed and cried. Whatever my virtues may be, I am afraid I am not strong-minded!

But at the end of a month—hurrah! I started full tilt into a new and engrossing profession, a profession which I may really claim to have invented, and which offers a wide field for idle women. It is healthy, moreover, and in its pursuit its followers can be of immense service to their overtaxed sisters. The vocation is called "Pram-Pushing for Penurious Parents," and it consists simply of taking charge of Tommy, or Bobby, or Baby for his morning or afternoon promenade, and thereby setting his mother free to take a much-needed rest!

The way it began was natural enough. I smiled at a pretty baby in the hall, and the baby smiled back at me, and threw a ball at my feet. I picked

it up, and gave it back to a worried-looking little mother who was endeavouring to arrange the wrapping in the perambulator with one hand, while with the other she clutched firmly at the arm of an obstreperous person of three. She smiled at me in wan acknowledgment, and I said, "May I help?" and tucked in one side of the shawl. Two mornings later I met the same trio returning from their morning's walk, a third time I picked the small boy out of a puddle, and helped to wipe off the mud. That broke the ice, and the mother began to bow to me, and to exchange a passing word. She is a delicate creature, and has the exhausted air of one whose life is all work and no play. One day we walked the length of the block together, and she told me that she had been married for four years, had had three children and lost one; that she kept only one maid, and so had to take the children out herself. It was tiring work, pram-pushing for four or five hours a day, but they must have fresh air. Nowadays doctors insisted that children should never stay in, even on wet days. She smiled mirthlessly.

"They are covered up and protected from damp. It's different for the poor mothers!"

She coughed as she spoke, and then and there the great idea leapt into my head. I did not disclose it; she would probably have put me down for a baby-snatcher at once; but I made a point of meeting

her on her daily outings, and of ingratiating myself with the children, and waited eagerly for an opportunity, which came in the shape of an increasing cough and cold. Then I pounced.

"Why shouldn't *I* take the children out this afternoon, and let you go home and rest? You are not fit to push this heavy pram."

She gaped at me, amazed and embarrassed.

"You? Oh, I couldn't possibly! Why should *you*?"

"Because I should love it. I have nothing to do, and the days seem so long. I'd be very careful."

"Oh, it's not that! I am sure you would! And the children would love it. They are so fond of you already; but——"

"Well?"

"I couldn't! It is too much. But I do thank you all the same. It's sweet of you to have thought of it!"

For the moment it was plainly tactless to urge her further, so I just repeated:—

"Well, I *mean* it! Please send for me if you change your mind," and retreated forthwith.

Behold the reward of diplomacy. That very evening Mr. Manners, the papa, knocked at my door and requested to see Miss Harding. I was reading comfortably, *sans* wig and *sans* spectacles, behind the locked door of my bedroom. The little maid, having been repeatedly instructed that all callers were to be shown into the drawing-room,

was no doubt elated to have an opportunity of turning precept into practice. I arose, hastily made myself look as elderly and discreet as possible, and sallied forth to greet him.

It was the funniest interview! He had brought down a copy of *Punch* (a week old), with his wife's compliments "in case I should like to see it". That was the excuse; the real reason was obviously to survey the extraordinary spinster of the basement flat, and discover if she were quite mad or just innocently eccentric. I could see him peering at me out of his tired, worried eyes, and if ever I worked hard to worm myself into a man's good graces, I did it during the next half-hour.

I pricked my ears, listening for "clues," and when one came, I played up to it with all my skill, agreeing with him, soothing him, hanging on his words. He looked almost as tired as his wife; there were shiny patches on his coat; his hair was turning white above the ears; he had the look of a man driven beyond his strength. I made him a cup of coffee, good coffee! over which he sighed appreciatively. I told him I liked the smell of smoke. I offered him the *Spectator* in exchange for *Punch*. At the end of half an hour he was looking at me wistfully, and saying in quite a natural, boyish voice:—

"I say, it was nailing good of you to offer to take out the kiddies to save my wife. She was quite touched. She does need a rest, poor girl, but, of course——"

“Don’t say ‘of course’ you cannot accept! The only ‘of course’ is to take me at my word. Mr. Manners, may I say exactly what I think?”

He looked startled and said, “Please do!” (Mem. I must try to remember that an impulsive manner is not suitable to grey hairs!)

“Well, it’s just this; if you won’t allow me to help your wife to have a little rest now, she will be obliged to take a longer one later on! That cough needs care. I know something about nursing, and I’m sure that if she goes on as she is doing now, she’ll break down altogether.”

“I know it,” he said miserably. “I’ve been feeling the same myself. That was why—to-night—when she told me, I——”

“Came down to see for yourself if I could be trusted!” I said laughing. “And what is your verdict, Mr. Manners? Do I look as if I would kidnap babies? Do I look as if I had strength enough to push a pram?”

He glanced at my grey locks, and said tactfully:—

“Bobby could walk part of the time. Kensington is fortunately flat. Miss Harding, I—I am very grateful. It’s most awfully good of you to worry about such perfect strangers. If you *will* relieve my wife for a few days, I shall be most awfully grateful!”

So it was arranged. I danced a jig of joy when I went back to my room, and caught sight of my

elderly reflection doing it in the glass, and laughed till I cried. My work had begun. The thin end of the wedge had wormed its way in. Now to push forward.

Mrs. Manners has another malady besides her cough. It's an obscure disease, but I have diagnosed it as "chronic inflammation of the conscience". For four long years she has been kept incessantly at work, looking after house and children, and has been unable to have one undisturbed hour, either by day or by night. Now, when she gets the chance, her conscience is horrified at the prospect. The first time I took the children for their afternoon walk I found, on my return, that she had used the time to turn out a cupboard, and looked more tired than ever. The next day I sent the maid downstairs to settle the children in the perambulator, when I produced a hot-water bottle from under my coat, and had a heart to heart talk with her there and then.

"Mrs. Manners, I am going to take you into your bedroom, tuck you up under the quilt, give you this hot-water bottle to cuddle, pull down the blinds, and leave you to rest there till we come in."

She positively shook with horror.

"Oh, Miss Harding, I *can't*. It is quite impossible! All that time? If you knew all I have to do. There is another cupboard——"

"Mrs. Manners, if you think I am taking charge of the children out of consideration for your cupboards, you are mistaken. I am doing it so that you may rest. A bargain is a bargain, and you are not playing fair. Now, are you coming, or are you not?"

She came, not daring to refuse, but protesting all the way.

"Well, if I must—— For a little time. For half an hour. I couldn't *possibly* rest more than half an hour."

"You've got to try. If I'm on duty for two hours, so are you. Don't dare to move from this bed till I give you leave."

It was pathetic to see her thin little face peering at me over the edge of the eider-down, quite dazed, if you please, at the idea of a two hours' rest! I felt as happy as a grig as I ran downstairs; happier still when we re-entered the flat two hours later, and not a sound came from behind that closed door. I undressed the children, and the maid tiptoed in with their tea with the air of a conspirator in a dark and stealthy plot.

"Not a sound out of her since you left! Poor thing! First chance of a bit of peace and quietness she's had for many a long day."

"Well, Mary, you and I are going to give her plenty more!" I said graciously, and Mary made me a slice of buttered toast on the spot to seal the partnership.

Tea was over when the door opened, and a sleepy, flushed face peeped round the door to look at the clock. When she saw the hands pointing to five, she looked as guilty as if she had robbed the bank.

Oh, it's a glorious thing to be able to help other people! It gives one a warm, glowy feeling about the heart which comes in no other way. These last days I have just lived for the moment when I could tuck that poor little woman in her cosy bed, and the other moment when I saw her rested, freshened face on rising. Even at the end of one week she looked a different creature, and felt it too.

"Actually, dear Miss Harding, I begin to feel as if I—I should like a new hat!" she said to me one day over tea. "Do you know the feeling? I think it is the best sign of convalescence a woman could have. For months, almost for years, I have not cared what I wore. Something to cover my head—that was all that was needed. To be always tired—deadly, hopelessly tired—takes the spirit out of one."

"No one should go on being too tired. It's very wrong to allow it."

She looked at me; a long look, affectionate, grateful, reproachfully amused.

"My dear, you live alone, and you have two maids. Evidently—excuse me—you have a comfortable income. My husband's business has been steadily falling off for the last two years. It is not

his fault; he works like a horse; no man could have done more, but circumstances have been against him. We keep one maid, who washes, bakes, and cooks, while I tend the babies, make their clothes and my own, knit, and mend, and patch, and darn, take the children out, bathe them, put them to bed, attend to them through the night, do the housekeeping by day, and struggle over the bills when they are in bed. Bobby is three years and a half old, and has had bronchitis and measles. Baby is eleven months, and cuts her teeth with croup. Between them came the little one who died. And then you sit there and tell me I ought not to be tired!"

"I beg your pardon. I'm sorry. I spoke without thinking. You are quite right—I know nothing about it. People who preach to others very often don't. Forgive me!"

"Don't be so penitent! It is really almost a relief to meet a woman who *doesn't* understand. All my friends are in pretty much the same case as myself, and they haven't got"—she stretched out her hand and timidly patted my arm—"my kind neighbour to help. Miss Harding, I think you must have been a fascinating girl!"

"Oh, I was!" I said warmly, and then made haste to change the conversation. "What about that hat? I'm quite a good amateur milliner. Look out your oddments and let me see what I can do."

CHAPTER XVII

NEIGHBOURS—AND REAL WORK

THE fame of me has gone abroad. I have been observed taking the Manners' infants in and out, and the result has been a simultaneous increase of interest, and—loss of prestige. No. 22, like Mrs. Manners, pushes her own "pram," but there the resemblance ends. She is a healthy, full-blown young woman, smartly—and unsuitably—attired in the very latest fashion of Kensington High Street. She wears large artificial pearls round her neck, and wafts a strong odour of lily of the valley perfume. Never for the fraction of a second did it occur to me to offer to relieve *her* of any of her duties; but she cast a pale blue eye at me, and wove her own little schemes. One afternoon, as I was tucking the coverings round Baby Margaret's feet, she came up to my side, and said in an exceedingly casual manner:—

"Oh, good afternoon. You are Miss Harding? I was just wondering—have you any engagement for the mornings?"

I looked at her calmly, and said I had. Several!

Most householders had. She jerked her head, and said impatiently :—

“I didn’t mean that. You take Mrs. Manners’ children out, I see. I might be glad of a little help myself. It’s such a bore pram-pushing every day. How much do you charge?”

It is difficult to look haughty through blue spectacles, and while I was trying, it occurred to me that it was a waste of time. It was a plain business question. She did not mean to be insulting, so I smiled instead—rather feebly, I confess—and said :—

“I don’t charge. Mrs. Manners is not well. It is a pleasure to me to take charge of the children, so that she may have a little rest.”

She “begged pardon” hastily, and with repetition, staring the while with incredulous eyes. Quite evidently she considered me a benevolent lunatic, and marked me down as a useful prey. I might not be willing to push her pram, but—— The very next evening a small servant knocked at the door with Mrs. Lorrimer’s compliments, and could Miss Harding lend her a fresh egg? (Her name is Lorrimer, and the children are called Claudia, Moreen, and Eric, and look it.) A fortnight has passed since that encounter, and the tale of her indebtedness to me is now as follows :—

One egg.

A cup of sugar.

Two lemons.

"A bit of butter, as we're run out."

A box of matches and a candle.

"One scuttle of nice cobbles, please. We have only slack left."

Three stamps.

"Just a pinch or two of tea, as we forgot to order over Sunday."

Bridget opines that it will go from bad to worse, and recommends putting a foot down. Gossip from the "Well" has it that if you "give in to them, they'll take the very dinner off the table". When it comes to that point, I shall certainly stamp hard; but in the meantime I let things slide. I suspect Mrs. Lorrimer of being too much engrossed in herself to trouble about such a detail as providing meals for her spouse. Without my aid he would probably have eaten his pancakes without any lemons, and feasted on dry bread by a smouldering fire. I like myself in the *rôle* of an unknown benefactor!

No. 19, who lives directly overhead, does not borrow my food or hire my services, but she does something far worse. Whenever I dare to poke a fire, or play on the piano, or shut a window, or let a door bang, as any ordinary domestic door is bound to bang in the course of a windy day, rap, rap comes a premonitory knocking on the floor, as if to say, "Inconsiderate and selfish worm!

How dare you attend to your own comfort at the expense of your neighbours overhead? Have the goodness to be quiet at once!" It's awfully unfair, because when they stoke their anthracite stoves, or throw their boots on the floor at 1 a.m. over my sleeping head, I could only retaliate by climbing to the top of my wardrobe, and knocking the white-wash off my own ceiling. Such are the ironies of life for the tenants of basement flats.

Besides the shoe-dropping, I am often kept awake at night by the sound of angry voices. I sadly fear that Mr. and Mrs. 19 do not live together in the peace and harmony which could be desired. Subjects of dissension seem generally to arise about 10 p.m., and thereafter deep masculine growls and shrill feminine yaps alternate until the small hours. On these occasions I make up my mind never, never to marry. Especially a bad-tempered man. Especially *one* bad-tempered man! But, of course, that question was settled long ago.

Hurrah! I am getting on. A most exciting thing has happened. The Manners know Mr. Thorold, and last night, when I was sitting with them after dinner (by request!), he came in to call, and we were introduced. He is a delicate, wearied-to-death, and wish-I-were-out-of-it-looking man, but when he smiles or gets interested his face lights up, and he is handsome and interesting. He looked

profoundly bored at finding me installed by the fire, but thawed later on, and asked my advice on various domestic problems which lie heavily on his soul.

“My housekeeper has such sensitive feelings. If I find fault, or even mildly suggest an improvement, she collapses into tears, and the children have a poor time of it for the rest of the day. Sometimes I think I must send her away, but I might get some one worse; and I am busy in the city, and have no time to look round.”

I did not feel capable of giving advice on this subject, but said soothingly:—

“I wish you would allow the little girls to come to tea with me sometimes. I have seen them coming in and out, and have longed to know them. I’m fond of children, and Mrs. Manners will tell you that I can be trusted.”

His face lit up; he actually beamed.

“It is good of you! They get so few changes. It would be the greatest treat! If I may I’ll bring them myself next Saturday.”

Shades of Aunt Eliza! For a moment I felt quite guilty; then I raised my eyes to the Chippendale mirror hanging on the opposite wall, and beheld the *douce* figure of Miss Harding with a Paisley shawl draped over her black silk shoulders, and I breathed again, and said primly that I should be very pleased, and were the dear little ones allowed currants, or

were they limited to plain sponge cake? He said impatiently :—

“Oh, poor kiddies! Anything you like. If they’re ill afterwards, it’s worth it. I’m afraid I am not much of a disciplinarian, Miss Harding. Life takes that *rôle* out of one’s hands. Let them be happy—that’s what I ask.”

His face puckered; he looked so sad, so helpless, so baffled, poor, big, helpless thing, that my heart just ached for him. Aunt Eliza was right—Evelyn Wastneys is *not* a suitable person to play good fairy to good-looking widowers! If this one looked particularly helpless and harassed for an hour at a stretch, and then asked her to marry him on Tuesday week, she would not have the strength of mind to say no, however much she dreaded the prospect. As he is a susceptible, appealing type of a man, and tired to death of that housekeeper, and Evelyn has—she really has!—a “way with her,” it would probably have come to that in the end. But Evelyn Harding may serenely do her best. She will never be put to the test.

The little girls are called Winifred and Marion. They have long pale faces, long fair hair, and charming dark-lashed eyes. Winifred looks delicate, and has an insinuating little lisp; Marion, when amused, has a deep, fat chuckle, which makes one long to hug her on the spot. They are badly dressed, badly shod, their stockings lie in wrinkles

all the way up, but they look thorough little ladies despite of all, and "behave as sich". They came to tea on Saturday, and we had hot scones, and jam sandwiches, and cake, and biscuits, and a box of crackers containing gorgeous rings and brooches and tie-pins and bracelets, and of the whole party I honestly believe "Father" enjoyed himself the most. He had four cups of tea, and ate steadily from every plate; and we all played games together afterwards, in the most happy, domestic fashion. Quite evidently he is a home lover, a man whose deepest interests will always centre round his own fireside.

Poor little dead wife! It seems sad that she should be taken away, while unhappy women like Mrs. 19 live on and on. If the issues of life and death were in mortal hands, how differently we should arrange things! I know at this moment half a dozen weary old creatures whose lives are no pleasure to themselves or to anyone else, but they live on, while the young and the happy fall by the way. Oh, how many mysteries there are around us! How wonderful, how absorbingly interesting it will be, when the time comes, to hear the explanation of all that seems so tangled to our present understanding! When I realise how uncertain life is, I am all in a tingle to be up and doing, to make myself of real, real use while I am still here. A married woman has her work cut out

to make a home ; a real happy home is as big an achievement as any one can wish, but when one is single and lonely——

Pause to shed a few self-pitying tears. Pause to wonder if it might not be better to make a man happy rather than to live alone, even if one were not really in love ?

Pause to decide. Certainly not ! Don't be weak-minded. A grave injustice to him, as well as to yourself.

Pause to dream of Charmion and Kathie, and feel lone and lorn because they don't write.

Grand decision. Always to be kind and considerate. To write regularly to lonely friends. Never to wax cross or impatient, neglect a duty, nor fail to render a service. To devote special attention and lavish special sympathy on spinsters in basement flats.

The orphan came into the room just as I was in the full flush of my resolutions. I snapped her head off, and found fault for five minutes on end. She departed—in tears.

Three weeks have passed by. I have written to Charmion, a letter full of love, and without one complaining word. I have written to Kathie, taking an interest in all the details of her new life ; I have written to Delphine, dropping words in season. I have worked hard for the Red Cross classes. I

have wheeled out the small Manners, and dispensed various teas to Winifred and Marion Thorold. I have met their father several times at the Manners' flat, and have likewise—low be it spoken—received two evening calls from him in my own domain. He says it is such a comfort to find a kind, motherly woman with whom to talk over his difficulties! He hesitates to trouble Mrs. Manners, who is already overworked. Winifred holds one shoulder a little higher than the other. Does that mean anything wrong with the spine? Ought she to lie down flat? Billie, the curly two-year-old, is always catching cold. Do I think his perambulator gets damp in the basement store-room? The grocer's bill was nineteen shillings last week. In "my girl's time" (I love to hear him say "My girl!") it was never above thirteen. Miss Brown, the house-keeper, is hinting that she needs a holiday. It would be a relief to be rid of her, but—who would take charge while she was away?

"Why not make it a general holiday? Lend me the little girls, farm out the babies to relations, throw off responsibilities, and have a real laze yourself. You know you would love it!" I said. "Haven't you a man friend who would take you away?"

"Oh, rather. The best of fellows. We were boys together. He's had a stiff time, too, so he understands. Miss Harding, what a brick you are!

Will you really take the girls? I say"—his face lit up with the boyish smile—"it would be a chance to buy them some clothes. Would you do it? Miss Brown has no taste. It's been one of my trials. My girl was so dainty. A pretty hat apiece, and a frock, and stockings to match—that wouldn't break the bank, would it? Do you think five pounds——"

I waved a protesting hand.

"Heaps! Heaps! Leave it to me. I'll make them as pretty as pictures. When—er—when I was young, I was fond of dress. I was considered to have good taste."

He smiled at me in the kind, forbearing manner in which people do smile at elderly women who exploit their own youth, and said vaguely:—

"Yes, I am sure—I am quite sure. Well, I must be off. Thank you for all your kindness."

He departed, but the very next night the maid brought a message to ask if Miss Harding had a thermometer. If so, would she be so very kind as to take Billie's temperature, as he seemed restless and feverish? I draped myself in the Paisley shawl in which I flatter myself I look my plainest and most ancient, ran upstairs, and was shown into Billie's bedroom. He was sitting up in his cot, looking so pretty with his dishevelled golden curls, his big bright eyes, and the fever flush on his cheeks. I guessed 102 at sight; but it was worse

than that—close on 103. I gave the thermometer the professional shake, looking, as I felt, pretty serious and troubled, whereupon Miss Brown took alarm at once, being evidently the useful kind of woman who loses her head in illness.

“Is he going to be ill? I don’t understand poultices and fomentations; couldn’t take the responsibility! As things are, there is more work than I can get through. I hope you will tell Mr. Thorold that if Billie is going to be ill, it is absolutely necessary to have help.”

I calmed her, and went into the dining-room to report. The air was full of smoke, and Mr. Thorold was sitting at one side of the fireplace, talking to another man who was facing him from another big leather chair. They both sprang up at my entrance, and Mr. Thorold said:—

“This is my friend, Mr. Hallett, of whom I spoke to you lately. We are discussing the possibility of a short trip. Edgar, this is Miss Harding, a very kind neighbour. She has come up on an errand of mercy to see one of the babies, who is a bit off colour. How do you find the small man, Miss Harding?”

He was not a bit anxious. In the interest of the talk with an old friend, the baby ailment had faded from his mind. I hated to bring the shadow to his face, but it had to be done.

“Billie has a high temperature, Mr. Thorold. I think a doctor ought to see him.”

He looked shocked—incredulous.

“To-night! Wouldn’t to-morrow morning——?”

“I should advise you to see him to-night. It may be nothing but a feverish cold, but it is half the battle to start treatment in time. He is nearly 103.”

“I will telephone at once,” he said shortly, and marched out of the room.

The tenants of Heath Mansions do not, as a rule, run to the extravagance of possessing a private telephone, but down in the basement there is a species of ice cupboard, where, in surroundings of abject dreariness, we deposit our pence and shout messages, to the entertainment and enlightenment of the maids at “Well” windows. Mr. Thorold was bound for this haunt, and the nice Mr. Hallett and I sat down to entertain one another during his absence.

He is nice! I liked him the moment I saw him, and I went on liking him more and more. He is a big, powerfully-built man, but his face is thin, the fine moulding of the bones showing distinctly beneath their slight covering. The clean line of his jaw is a joy to behold; his eyes are dark and unusually deep-set—I would say “cavernous,” if I had not a particular dislike to the word. He has large, expressive hands, and a low-pitched, unusually deliberate way of talking.

“I hope the youngster is not going to develop anything serious!”

“I hope not. He is a dear little fellow. It is so sad to see a child ill.”

“It is; but—frankly!” he said, with a slow, grave glance, “I was thinking more of my friend. He has had more than his share of trouble, and another spell of anxiety would be hard luck. It’s a big strain on a man to play father *and* mother to a growing family.”

“There is one thing which would be harder! To have no growing family to look after, and to take his mind off himself.”

He looked at me sharply, and as sharply looked away. I had a lightning impression that I had touched a tender spot, but it passed the next moment at sound of the perfectly calm, perfectly controlled voice:—

“You think that is so? I should be glad to agree, but Frank has lost an ideal companion. I did not imagine that such young children could fill the gap.”

“In a sense they never can, but they fill so many smaller gaps that it is impossible to think of the big one all the time. If you had any idea what it is to live in a flat this size, with five small children tumbling over each other all day long, laughing and quarrelling and getting into mischief on every conceivable occasion, behaving like perfect little

fiends one hour and angels straight from heaven the next—well, you would realise that there isn't much time left over to sit down and nurse a private woe!"

He smiled. He smiles, as the Scotch say, "with deefficulty". The lines of his face are all set for gravity and reserve.

"That is so. But at night? After such a tornado the solitary evenings must seem lonelier than ever."

"I don't imagine there is much time for reflection. There is generally some work to keep him going. Rupert has a weakness for dropping things down the sinks. Last week, for a change, he drove a nail into a gaspipe. And there are the bills to pay, and new things to order, and endless notes of inquiry and arrangements to be written. His evenings are well filled up."

"I see you are a believer in counter-irritants." The deep-set eyes rested on me with a speculative glance. A practical, unimaginative woman, who has neither understanding nor sympathy for romance—that was obviously the verdict. If he only knew! If he only knew!

Presently Mr. Thorold came back and said the doctor would come round almost at once. Would I be so very good as to stay to hear his verdict? Miss Brown was not much use in cases of illness. She lost her head. The trouble to me seems to be

that she has lost her heart—if she ever had one to lose!

The doctor said that Billie had bronchitis, and that his lungs were not quite clear. Someone must sit up with him, keep a bronchitis kettle going, and see that he did not kick off the clothes. His temperature must be taken at certain hours. A great deal might depend upon the next few hours. He was afraid it might be difficult to get in a nurse before morning. Was there anyone who could——

Miss Brown promptly put herself out of the running, so what was there left for me to do but modestly to confess that I had passed two Red Cross examinations, could flick a thermometer with the best, and baffle the tricks of the most obstinate bronchitis kettle that ever overbalanced itself, or spat hot water instead of steam.

The three men stood round looking at me with big, grateful eyes, and though I was honestly sorry about Billie, deep down at the bottom of my heart I *glowed*. This was in very deed being of use! Here was real work lying ready at my hand!

CHAPTER XVIII

A STRUGGLE FOR A LIFE

BILLIE has been desperately ill. For three weeks he has lain at the point of death, his little life hanging by a thread. Two trained nurses have been in attendance, and a third unofficial one, in the person of old Miss Harding! Winifred and Marion are living in my flat; Bridget looks after them, and does our own housekeeping, and also supplements Miss Brown's efforts, which are, to put it mildly, inadequate for the occasion. She does not seem to realise that when people are torn with anxiety they don't appreciate boiled mutton; and that when they sit up half the night, waiting in sickening suspense to hear the next temperature, a hot cup of chocolate can be more precious than rubies.

Therefore Bridget and I manufacture dainties, and carry them upstairs to supplement the supplies.

For the first few days the illness took a normal course, and anxiety, though real, was not acute; but on the fourth day strength failed noticeably, and oxygen was ordered to help the clogged lungs

to work. At first it was given every two hours, then hourly, then every half-hour, and every woman who knows anything about nursing understands what *that* means, plus doses of brandy, struggles to pour as much milk as possible down an unwilling throat, and a constant taking of pulse and temperature, to say nothing of hypodermic injections at those awful moments when there seems no pulse to feel. It means that no one woman, be she ever so competent, can keep up the fight single-handed for twelve hours at a stretch, and that an understudy to work under her may mean the very turning of the scale. I have been understudy by night, and proud I am to record that Nurse proclaims me unusually "handy" for a member of the "laity". Hour after hour we have fought together for the little darling's life, while he lay unconscious against the piled cushions, a waxen image, unrecognisable as the bonnie curly-headed Billie we had loved. We racked our brains to think of new means and new contrivances to fight the ever-increasing danger. With the aid of screens and a sheet we contrived a tent over his cot, through a hole in which the elongated cardboard funnel of the steam-kettle could enter and give increased relief to the breathing. We made mustard poultices with white of egg instead of water, to save needless irritation of the skin; we used the French expedient of putting quinine pads under the armpits to reduce the terrible

temperature. Nurse was indefatigable—a miracle of energy and resource—but through all her anxiety and tenderness for the little patient, it was impossible not to recognise the keen professional zest in a “good case”.

“Give me a bad pneumonia, and I’m happy!” said she, frankly, and she meant what she said.

At those rare intervals when Billie fell into a fitful sleep, I used to steal out of the room and pay a visit to the dining-room, where, on two arm-chairs on opposite sides of the fire, the poor father and his friend sat drearily smoking, and waiting until the small hours of the morning. It was useless to tell Mr. Thorold to go to bed. His wife had breathed her last at two o’clock in the morning, and he was possessed by a dread that Billie would do the same. At three or thereabouts he might be persuaded to move, but until then it was but a waste of breath to ask it. Poor fellow! To have his old friend by his side was the best comfort that was left, but how he must have missed his wife, and how endlessly, breathlessly long the hours must have seemed, sitting with folded hands, with nothing to do but to wait! Even I—an outsider—was oppressed by the difference in the atmosphere of the two rooms. In the sick-room there was suffering indeed, but there was also a constant, earnest fight; here, the heavy, smoke-filled air seemed to breathe of despair!

On those midnight visits, the first thing I did after giving my report, was to open the window, and the second to make a jug of chocolate, beating the powder in the milk till it foamed, in tempting continental fashion. The men shivered and protested. They were in a draught; they were not hungry; they wanted neither chocolate nor sandwiches; but I went on with my preparations in an elderly, persistent fashion, and said if they didn't—well, I did, and I hoped they would not grudge me a little refreshment in the midst of my labours. By the time that the little meal was prepared, the smoke had cleared away and left a little air to breathe, so then I made a favour of shutting the window and poking the fire, and we would sit down together, and—it was wonderful how much we could eat! If Aunt Eliza could have seen me then, what—oh, what would she have said! How I blessed the grey wig and the spectacles, and the few deft, disfiguring touches which made my presence so easy and comfortable, not only for myself but for those two poor, sad, helpless young men. However much one may rail against convention, it remains an unalterable fact that youth and good looks are *not* the best qualification for indiscriminate work among one's fellow-creatures. I must remember this fact when I grow really old, and apply it as balm to my wounded vanity.

Over the chocolate and sandwiches we would

talk—not about Billie, if possible ; and I learnt that the two men had first met at Harrow, had then been separated for many years, and had renewed the old friendship during the last two years.

There is evidently a strong sympathy between them—a sympathy of suffering, I think, for with all his charm, it is evident that Mr. Hallett is not a happy man. He says little about himself, but I gather that he travels a great deal, that he writes for various reviews, and that—to say the least of it—he is not overburdened with wealth. He never mentions any “belongings,” and is evidently unmarried. I wonder why, for he is certainly unusually attractive. Sometimes when we have been sitting talking together, I have been so conscious of this attraction that I have had quite a violent longing to be Evelyn Wastneys once more, and to meet him, so to speak, on his own ground !

He is most nice to me—oh, most nice ! He thinks me a kind, sensible, generous old dear ; says I deserve a Victoria Cross, and that no block of mansions is complete without me. One night he asked me smilingly if I would come and nurse him if he were ill ; another time he said he could almost find it in his heart to wish that my money would disappear, so that he could engage me as a permanent housekeeper. Then Mr. Thorold interrupted, and said that the first claim was his, and that if my services were to be bought, no other man should have

them unless over his own dead body. They argued jestingly, while I blushed—a hot, overwhelming blush, and seeing it, they paused, looking mystified and distressed, and abruptly changed the conversation. Did they think me ridiculous and a prude, or did that blush for the moment obliterate the sham signs of age, and show them for the moment the face of a girl? I should like to know, but probably I never shall.

For four long weeks Billie's life hung in the balance, for after the pneumonia crisis was passed, unconsciousness continued, and the terrible word "meningitis" was whispered from lip to lip. There were heart-breaking days to be lived through, when the terror was no longer that he might die, but that he might live—deprived of speech, of hearing, possibly of reason itself. Never while I live shall I forget those days; but looking back, I can realise that they have taught me one great lesson, branded it on heart and brain so that I can never, never forget. The lesson is that death is not the last and worst enemy which we are so apt to think it when our dear ones are in its grasp. Oh, there were hours of darkness in which death seemed to us a lovely and beautiful thing, when we blamed ourselves for shrinking from the wrench of giving back a little child into God's tender care. Who could compare a darkened life on earth with the perfected powers, the unimaginable glories of eternity?

There were times when our prayers were reversed, and we asked God to take Billie home !

But he lived ; he spoke ; he opened his dark eyes and smiled upon us ; he demanded a battered "boy stout" doll, and hugged it to his pneumonia jacket ; he drank his milk, and said "More !" he grew cross and fractious—oh, welcome, gladdening sign !—and said, "Doe away ! No more daddies ! No more nursies ! Don't want nobodies ! Boo-hoo-hoo !" and we went and wept for gladness.

Illness, the really critical touch-and-go illness which nurses call "a good case," turns a home into an isolation camp. The outer world retreats to an immeasurable distance, and the watchers stare out of the windows, and behold with stupefaction hard-hearted men and women walking abroad on two legs, with hats on their heads, and umbrellas in their hands, talking and laughing and pursuing their petty avocations, not in the least affected by the fact that the temperature had again soared up to 104, and the doctor spoke gravely about heart strain. It seems inconceivable that human creatures, living a few yards away, are actually going to parties, and attending theatres, trying on new clothes, and worrying about cracked cups.

It was with much the same shock of incredulity that, on descending to my flat one afternoon, I was met with the news that a gentleman was in the

drawing-room waiting to see me. Bridget was out walking with the little girls, and the orphan, as usual, had opened the door. I demanded to be told "all about it," upon which she inhaled a deep breath, and set forth her tale after the manner of a witness in the police court.

"He says to me, 'Is Miss Harding at home?' I says, 'Yes, sir, she's at home, but she's out at the moment nursing a little boy upstairs'. He says to me, 'Is Miss Evelyn Wastneys at home?' I says, 'She don't live here, sir. There has some letters come——' He says, 'When will Miss Harding be in?' I says, 'She generally gives us a look, as it might be, about six, before the young ladies settles to bed'. 'Then I'll wait!' he says, takes off his hat, and walked in. I said, 'What name shall I say, please?' He said, 'It doesn't matter about my name. She doesn't know it.'"

I stood silent, digesting the news.

"What sort of a gentleman is he? What does he look like?"

The orphan considered, silently chewing the cud.

"He looks," she opined deliberately, "as if he could give you *what for!*"

At that, without one second's pause, I scuttled into my own room and locked the door behind me. (I would have "locked and double locked" it, as heroines of fiction do on such occasions, but it has always remained a mystery to me how they manage

to do it!) That being done I fell into a chair, and breathlessly confronted—the worst!

It was the Squire! I knew it without a doubt. If the orphan had devoted an hour to her description, she could not have been more apt. In some mysterious way he had tracked me to my lair. I might have known he would do it! He was not the sort of man to be daunted by a closed door. He would put out the whole of his big, indomitable force, till by hook or by crook it flew open, and the secret was revealed. Mercifully, however, it was so far only Miss Harding whom he had discovered; Evelyn Wastneys still eluded his grasp, and if I could summon enough nerve and courage to carry through one final interview, all might yet be well. It was useless to say I would not see him. He would simply wait until I did. The only result would be to arouse his suspicions. I rose slowly and confronted myself in the glass.

The disguise was good, but was it good enough? I hastily opened my “make up” case, and accentuated the lines which the expert had shown were most telling—the curve of the upper lip, the kink in the eyebrow, the long wrinkle from nose to chin. I wrapped my Paisley scarf round my shoulders, took my courage in both hands, and opened the door. I decided to go into the dining-room, draw the casement curtains, seat myself with my back to the light, and—send the orphan to summon him to

my presence ! I was nervous and scared, but—let me confess it—the moment was not without a fearful joy ! My heart was beating with quick, excited throbs. It was the oddest, most inexplicable thing, but I—I really wanted to see him. If a wish could have spirited him away, I could not have brought myself to breathe it. It seemed suddenly as if, unknown to myself, I had missed him, been missing him for a long, long time——

The door opened and he came in.

CHAPTER XIX

A DOUBLE EXCITEMENT

HE wore a dark suit, and carried a silk hat in his hand. The conventional dress made a great difference in his appearance; it always does when one is accustomed to see a man in the easy, becoming garb of the country. He looked older, more imposing; in the dim light it seemed to me that he was thinner too, had lost some of his deep tan.

I rose from my chair and bowed. He bowed too, and said:—

“Miss Harding, I believe?”

Long might he believe it! I waved him to a chair, and said suavely, “Pray sit down”.

“I—er—I called to ask if you would be kind enough to give me Miss Wastneys’ address. I believe her letters are sent to this address.”

“May I ask who gave you that information?”

“I’m sorry; but I’m not at liberty to say. It was a discovery which has given me considerable difficulty to make.”

“Excuse me, Mr.—er——” I stopped short with an admirable air of inquiry.

"My name is Maplestone."

"Thank you! I presume, Mr. Maplestone, that you are aware of Miss Wastneys' wish to keep her address private for the moment. Do you consider yourself justified in acting in direct opposition to her wishes?"

"I do," he said sturdily. "I warned her that I would do everything in my power to find her. I am only sorry that I have been so long in doing it."

"I am afraid she would not share your regret. In any case, I cannot take the responsibility of helping you any further."

"You refuse to tell me where to find her?"

"I am sorry to appear discourteous, Mr. Maplestone, but I have no choice."

He looked at me, a cool, casual glance, and impatiently frowned. There was no flicker of recognition in his look. To him I was obviously a mere figure-head, an obstinate, elderly woman who stood as an obstacle in his path. He hesitated for a moment, and then said emphatically:—

"My business is imperative. It is absolutely necessary to see Miss Wastneys."

"I think she must decide this point."

"Madam!"—he glared at me reproachfully—"you are probably not aware that I have asked Miss Wastneys to be my wife?"

"I was not aware, Mr. Maplestone, that Miss Wastneys had accepted that offer."

"She has not. That is just the point. If she had, I should not need help. But she is going to! That is why I am so anxious to find her—to prevent further waste of time."

Braced against my cushions, I gasped in mingled exasperation and dismay. That tone of certainty impressed me against my will. It required an effort to preserve an unruffled appearance.

"I cannot give you any help, Mr. Maplestone. To the best of my belief, you are wrong in your expectations."

"Evelyn—Miss Wastneys is your niece, I believe?"

I bowed, mentally quoting the orphan's qualification:—

"Sort of!"

"May I ask if she has confided in you—told you the history of our acquaintance?"

For one moment I hesitated, then:—

"I think I may say that I know practically all that there is to tell."

He leant forward suddenly, rested an arm on the table, and fixed me with eager eyes.

"Miss Harding, I want a friend! I want an ally. I came here to-day, hoping to find one in you. Will you be on my side?"

I drew back; but, before I had time to protest, he hurled another crisp, sharp question at my head:—

"Do you love your niece?"

The question appealed to me. I answered promptly, as it were mentally licking my lips:—

“I *do*! I may say I am much attached to Evelyn. She has faults (judicially), but she is a pleasant, well-meaning girl. She has been (unctuously) very kind to me.”

“She is kind to everyone,” he said shortly, “except myself! Of course she has faults! Plenty of them. You could not know her without seeing that.”

I glared, outraged. Oh, indeed! If my faults are so many and so obvious, why on earth does he——?

“You are very keen-sighted for a lover, Mr. Maplestone,” I said coldly. “If I were Evelyn, I should prefer the idealism which is usual under the circumstances. But perhaps you do not pose as an ordinary lover.”

“I don’t know,” he said shortly—“I don’t know. This is a new experience to me. I can only say one thing”—his voice softened, swelled into deep, low notes—“she is my life. She means everything—the beginning and the end. I shall fight on and on until she is mine.”

Miss Harding coughed, and twitched at her shawl, and blinked at the ceiling, and feebly shook her grey head.

“It is a pity,” she said weakly, “to make too sure! In these matters force is—er—is out of place.

Evelyn must decide. She should not be coerced. If I know her nature, coercion will do no good. She is inclined to obstinacy."

"Coercion would fail, but love—— Your niece is very feminine. She would be unhappy alone. She needs to be loved. I have love to give her—enough to satisfy any girl—more than enough! At the bottom of her heart she knows it. She ran away because she was afraid. Left no address."

"Mr. Maplestone, I am sorry to appear unkind, but Miss Wastneys' plans were made before she guessed your wishes."

That was true, and hit him hard. His face fell, and he looked so quelled, so dejected, that my heart ached with remorse. What foolish thing I might have said I don't know, but at that moment the door burst open, and Winifred and Marion precipitated themselves into my arms. Taking no notice of the strange man, they proceeded to confide the adventures of their walk. It was "Miss Harding, this; darling Miss Harding, that; Miss Harding, dear, the other," while I undid their mufflers, and smoothed their hair, and smiled in benevolent interest. What could be a finer testimony to Miss Harding's verisimilitude than the blandishments of these sweet innocents?

For some minutes Mr. Maplestone's presence was ignored, but when I looked at him again it was to realise with surprised curiosity that his bearing had

undergone a startling change. His cheeks had flushed, the weary lines had disappeared, he looked young, brisk, assured. Nothing had happened to account for it; nothing had been said, bearing in the remotest sense on his affairs. I had made no slip of any kind, but had been laboriously elderly and restrained, and yet, there it was—an unmistakable air of satisfaction and relief.

He rose, held out his hand.

“I see you are busy. I won’t detain you longer. If you will allow me I will call again.”

“Mr. Maplestone, excuse my want of hospitality, but it is quite useless.”

He retained my hand in his; he spoke in a pleading voice.

“I am a very lonely man. I have no one else to whom I can speak. It would be a pleasure just to see anyone who belonged—— I will promise not to be a nuisance. Please let me come!”

“Well!” I said helplessly. “Well!”

Short of being absolutely brutal, what else could I say? Besides—it may be a pleasure to me, too!

That same evening a letter arrived from Charmion. Nothing like having all one’s excitements at the same time. It was good to see the dear writing again, and I was in the mood when I badly needed some words of comfort. I tore open the envelope, hoping to find them inside.

This is the letter:—

“EVELYN, DEAR,—How is it faring with you, I wonder, in your grey London world, while I laze beneath Italian skies? It is a rest to know that you understand my silence, and don't need to be reminded that it does not mean forgetfulness. That big heart of yours can be very patient and forbearing. I have good cause to know that, but I also know that no one in the world more keenly enjoys a word of love and appreciation, so here's a confession for you, dear. Read it, lock it up in your heart, and never, never refer to it in words! This is it, then. During these last weeks, when I have been fighting the old battle of the last six years, I have discovered to my surprise, and—let me confess it—dismay, that my point of view has strangely altered. I still consider that I have been the victim of one of the cruellest deceptions which a woman could endure; I still believe that in that first ghastly hour of discovery, flight was justified and natural, but—— Well, Evelyn, dear! I have been living for months in very close intimacy with a little girl who thinks no evil, and is always ready to find a good explanation for what may on the surface appear to be unkind, and it has had its effect.

“I keep asking myself, ‘In my place, what would Evelyn have done?’ and the answer disturbs my sleep. You are impulsive, my dear, and your temper is not beyond reproach. If you loved deeply you would be exacting, and would fiercely resent deceit.

You would have run away even more impetuously than I did myself, but—but—you would not have kept up your resentment for six long years, or refused the offender a right to speak! If I know my Evelyn, before a month had passed her heart would have softened, and she would be turning special pleader in his defence, racking her brain for extenuating explanations. And if there had been none—I can imagine you, Evelyn, shouldering your burden with a set, gallant little face, going back to your husband, and saying to yourself, ‘Am I a coward to be daunted by the failure of one little month? He married me for my money—very well, he shall have his price! I will give it to him, freely and willingly, but I will give him other things too—companionship, interest, sympathy, so that in time to come he shall love me for myself! I am young and pretty and intelligent—I can do it if I care enough to be patient and unselfish. I married him for better or worse. With God’s help, I will turn this “worse” into “better” before our lives are done!’

“Oh, I assure you, my dear, I cut a poor figure in my own eyes, when I contrast my conduct with what yours would have been in my place. If we had met years ago things might have gone differently, but now it is too late. Too late for apologies and recantations, that is to say, for they would not be acceptable, even if I could bring myself to the point of offering them. This sounds as if your

example had had no real effect after all, but it is not so. Outward circumstances may remain the same, but some of the inward bitterness has gone! Do you remember the old fairy story about the unfortunate king who had three iron bands clamped tightly round his heart? It was the result of a spell, of course, and the only thing which could break their hold was when some mortal did some really fine and noble deed, then with a great bang one of the bands broke loose and conveniently disappeared.

“Well, dear little girl, if your present crack-brained mission is not working out to your satisfaction, if your neighbours in the ‘Mansions’ (?) are unappreciative or appreciative in objectionable ways—comfort yourself with the reflection that your sweet example has burst one of Charmion’s iron bands. I think on reflection one might almost say *two*, and that she daily blesses you for the relief!

“I can’t send you an address. I have no idea where I am going next, but before very long you will see me again. I’ll burst in upon you some day, with a Paris hat on my head (and another in my box for a pretty friend!) and snatch you away from your fads and fancies, and carry you off to ‘Pastimes,’ to gloat over, all to myself! Don’t have anything to say to any presumptuous man who may try to lure you away. For the period of our lease you belong to me, and I am not going to give you up.

“CHARMION.”

I smiled, wiped a furtive tear, and carefully folded up the sheet. It *did* comfort me to know that I had helped Charmion. I thought happily of seeing her again, of all the long interesting talks we would have together.

Incidentally I thought of our lease. If we paid a penalty, we could break it at three years.

CHAPTER XX

STRANGE CONVERSATIONS

BILLIE is slowly recovering. He is sitting up in his cot, languidly permitting himself to be adored, waited upon by obsequious attendants, and fed upon the fat of the land. This is the period when outsiders cry gushingly to an invalid's relations, "How happy you must be!" But as a cold matter of fact they usually feel very depressed and snappy and bored. This sounds thankless, but it is nothing of the sort; the thankfulness is all there, stored up for later realisation, but for the moment tired nerves are in the ascendant, and pay one out for the long-drawn strain.

Relieved from acute anxiety, Mr. Thorold began to think of the cost, count up doctors' visits, and sigh like a furnace; Miss Brown gave notice. "She wasn't blind and she wasn't deaf. She was aware that she was not giving satisfaction, and it would be better for both parties——" The general servant, who had been quite heroic during the time when work went on the twenty-four hours round, now took to banging dishes and muttering as she

left the room. Old Miss Harding, having lost much sleep, and spent her few leisure hours in reading aloud to her small guests, exhibited a tendency to tears and self-pity. Mr. Hallett, disappointed of a hoped-for holiday with his friend as companion, shrugged his shoulders, and inquired dismally: "What can you expect? Things always go wrong in this miserable world!"

Each man in turns paid visits to my flat, and discussed his troubles at length. Mr. Thorold's were mostly financial. What could he do to cut down expenses? Would I recommend sending the children to live in the country? Ridiculously cheap houses could be had, if one did not mind living miles from a station. He himself must, of course, remain in town; but in a cheap boarding-house he could manage to live on very little—say a hundred a year—and when he took a holiday he could "run down to the country". It would be good for the children.

"While it lasted," I said drily. "Their father might live—with luck—for a year or eighteen months. It seems hardly worth while having the expense of a removal for such a short time."

He sighed, looked for a moment as if he were going to declare that he would be glad to be out of it, then pulled himself together and said:—

"Well, but I must pull in somehow to pay for all these extra expenses! Have you anything to suggest?"

“You might let this flat furnished for a few months in spring. The porters tell me there are tenants to be found at that time. Odd, isn’t it, that the season should affect ‘Weltham Mansions’? It’s the lap of the waves, I suppose, but it seems a long way to flow. I could help you to find cheap country quarters, and you could fit in your own holiday at the same time, and so save travelling expenses. Lazing about in a garden may not be exciting, but it’s the rest you need. I knew a very tired man who went off for a golfing week with a friend. His wife told me he took a fortnight to recover. She said so to the doctor, and he said, ‘Of course! What did you expect? It would have been better if he had gone to bed.’”

He shrugged impatiently.

“Maybe it is quite true. I suppose it is. But when a man has only one fortnight in the year, he might be allowed to enjoy it in his own way! It’s an idea, though—letting the flat. Thanks for the suggestion. I’ll speak to an agent.”

Mr. Hallett rested his big shoulders against my cushions, and said in his low, grave tones:—

“You are a woman—you understand these things. Is there any way in which I can help? It’s pretty tough to see an old friend worried to death, and just sit and look on—but Thorold’s proud, and it’s difficult to interfere. It seems a cruel thing that illness should fall so heavily upon the middle classes.

The rich are independent, the poor have hospitals; but a man in Thorold's position is no sooner through with the mental torture than he is up against an army of bills. It seems that Billie is bound to keep his nurses for several weeks longer. That's a big item in itself."

It was! Often during these last weeks I had thought to myself what a grand occupation it would be for an independent woman to train as a nurse, and then give one or two doctors leave to call her in to serve—without payment—in cases like the present, where need was great and means were small. I went off into a day-dream in which I saw myself, in cap and apron, acting as ministering angel to the suffering middle class, to be roused by Mr. Hallett's voice saying tentatively:—

"I'm a poor man, but I am alone in the world, so there's no object in saving. Why shouldn't I settle a few of the bills for Billie's illness and say nothing about it?"

I shook my head.

"Mr. Thorold would find out and be furious. You must help openly, or not at all. You have helped by keeping him company all these weeks."

He hitched his shoulders, and made a grimace of disparagement.

"It's a long time since my company could be called cheering, I'm afraid. Thorold is 'down and out' himself, and he ought to have happy people

about him." He turned his dark eyes upon me with sudden interest. "Like *you*!" he said emphatically, "like *you*! Excuse a personal remark, Miss Harding, but you seem to have an eternal flow of vitality. Thorold and I were talking about you last night, comparing you with other women of your—er—your generation. We agreed that you left an extraordinary impression of youth!" He looked at me with wistful eyes. He was a lonely man, and I was a woman, conveniently at hand, and possessed of a "feeling heart". An impulse towards confidence struggled to birth. In his eyes I could see it grow.

"I suppose," he began tentatively, "you have had an easy life?"

"In a material sense—yes! But I have had my trials." A wave of self-pity engulfed me and quivered in my voice. "I have been separated, by death or distance, from all my relatives. My best friend is abroad."

"Death—or distance!" he repeated the words in his deep, slow tones, as though they had struck a note in his own heart. "But distance is death, Miss Harding! The worst kind of death. Desolation without peace! Thorold thinks himself broken-hearted, but there are men who would envy him his clean, sweet grief. His sorrow is for himself alone. She is at peace!"

"Ah," I said quickly, "I know what you mean.

When we are quite young, death seems the crowning loss, but there are worse things—I've discovered that! I realised it in those terrible days when we feared for Billie's brain. When you love people very much, it would be a daily death to know that they were suffering."

He gazed gloomily into the fire.

"It is extraordinary—the capacity for suffering of the human heart! Physically we are so easily destroyed. An invisible germ will do it, the prick of a finger, a draught of cold air; but a man can live on, suffering mental torture, month after month, year after year, and his weight will hardly decrease by a pound. You read of broken hearts, but there are no such things! Hearts are invulnerable, torture-proof, guaranteed to endure all shocks!"

It occurred to me that it was time that Miss Harding exerted her vitality and stopped this flow of repining. The poor man had evidently had some tragedy in his life which had warped his outlook. He needed cheering—we all needed cheering; proverbially the surest way of cheering yourself is to cheer other people; therefore the sane and obvious way of spending his money was in providing cheer for the company. I said as much, and he said, "Certainly; but how? It was winter time. A winter's day in London holds an insuperable barrier against any possibility of enjoyment." I said, "Not at all! There were heaps of things—heaps

of ways." He said, "Would I kindly specify one or two of the 'heaps'?" I said, "Certainly not! The essence of a treat lay in its quality of surprise. It was for him to think." He smiled at me with whimsical amusement, and cried, "You said that just like a girl. You are a girl at heart, Miss Harding, in spite of your grey hairs. What a pity you did not marry, you would have given some man and some kiddies such a thundering good time. I know, of course, that it was your own doing. There must have been——"

"Oh, there were!" I cried glibly. "Several!"

"But you couldn't—— You were never tempted?"

"No, never. At least——" Suddenly I found that it was necessary to qualify that denial. "There are two things which are always tempting to a woman, Mr. Hallett—love and strength! Every woman would be glad to have a strong, loving man to take care of her—if he were the right man!"

"Well!" he sighed, and rose heavily from his seat. "No doubt you knew best, but—I hope you gave him his chance! We men have many sides, but the best side is apt to remain hidden until some woman brings it out. If he loved you, you owed him something. I hope you played fair and gave him his chance!"

He turned towards the door; we shook hands,

and he left without another word. I turned back to the fire, sat me down, and thought.

Ralph Maplestone had demanded his chance, and I had thought myself noble and brave in refusing to give it. He was strong and he was loving ; he had asked nothing better than to take care of me. Would the time ever come, when I was really old, when I should sit by a lonely hearth and look back and regret ? I thought of Mr. Hallett's voice as he spoke those last words, and saw a vision of his face. It is a beautiful face, and I dearly love beauty. What a satisfaction it would be to go through life looking at the curve of that nose and the modelling of that chin and jaw ! I thought of the Squire's stern voice, and his blunt, plain-featured face. Always, always, so long as I lived, I should long to take a pair of pincers and tweak that nose into shape, and nip little pieces of flesh from the neck, and pad them on the hollows beneath the cheek-bones. Suddenly I began to laugh. I imagined myself doing it—saw the expression in the blue, startled eyes.

Strange how plain faces can fascinate more than beautiful ones ! My laughter died away. It is difficult to keep on laughing by oneself. I was tired, and had been giving out sympathy all day ; depression clutched me, and a restless irritability. At this auspicious moment the orphan knocked at the door and announced that No. 19 would be glad to speak a few words.

"Show her in!" I said, and in she came—a pretty, thin, little woman, with a tempery eye.

"I am sorry to intrude, but you must really understand that this is too much! When people live in flats, it is essential that they show some consideration for their neighbours. Will you kindly listen to that?"

I listened. Winifred and Marion were playing at "bears," and chasing Bridget to her death. Engrossed in my own thoughts, I had paid no attention, beyond a subconscious satisfaction that they were enjoying themselves. The roars did not annoy me, but they were certainly fairly loud. I tendered a civil explanation.

"It's Mr. Thorold's little girls. Their brother has been dangerously ill. They are staying with me."

"Is there any necessity for them to shriek at the pitch of their voices?"

"They are out for hours every day. This is their play-time before they go to bed. They go at seven."

"And wake at six! For the last fortnight we have been disturbed every morning. My husband wishes me to say that if it goes on he will complain to the landlord. I have complained before, as you know, but without effect. Ever since you came we have been annoyed."

I was furious. Whatever had happened during

the last fortnight, no one could have been quieter before. "And what about themselves?" I said coldly. "Do you imagine that the landlord will be able to make children sleep beyond their usual hour?"

"Certainly not, but they can be kept quiet. When people go to bed late"—she stopped short, arrested by my expression, stared for a moment, and then concluded—"they naturally object to being disturbed in the morning. We breakfast at nine. This morning we were kept awake by quarrelling voices for over an hour."

I bowed politely.

"I am sorry. It is most disagreeable. I have had the same experience myself, but at the beginning of the night."

The words jumped out. The moment I had said them I was sorry, and when I saw her poor startled face I could have cried. The slow red rose in her cheeks; we stared into each other's eyes, and both spoke at the same time. She said:—

"Oh-h! Can you *hear*?"

I said:—

"Oh, I'm sorry! I should not have said it. Forgive me! I'm tired and cross after nursing upstairs. I want to quarrel myself. I'm sorry! I'll keep the children quiet. They will soon be going home. Please always let me know if I'm a bother. I'll do everything I can!"

She looked at me—a puzzled look—and mumbled cold thanks. This was a case when my apparent years were against me. If I had been Evelyn—a girl like herself—we would have clasped hands and made friends. As it was, she distrusted the elderly woman who showed an impulsiveness foreign to her years. She departed hurriedly, leaving me plunged in fresh woe.

A nice person *I* am, to blame a man for having a bad temper ! I have hurt a sister woman, who has the hardest lot which any woman can have in life—a loveless home !

CHAPTER XXI

MR. MAPLESTONE IS PLEASED

AS a result of my suggestion, Mr. Hallett has taken Mr. Thorold to several concerts, and as a crowning effort actually lured him to a week-end at Brighton. That was last week ; and as the day was mild and—almost !—sunny, I suggested to the little girls that we should go holiday-making on our own account, and pay a visit to the Zoo.

The proposal excited great enthusiasm, and an early lunch was ordered so that we could set forth in good time, so as to have a couple of hours with the animals before adjourning to a confectioner's for tea. I remembered my own childhood too well to suggest returning home for the meal. To drink tea out of strange cups, in a strange room, to have a practically unlimited choice of strange cakes—this is a very orgie of bliss to anything “in one figure,” and when the tea is followed by a drive home in a taxi, satisfaction approaches delirium. I remembered Mr. Thorold's pathetic “Make them happy !” and determined that, if it were in my power, this should be a day to be remembered.

Lunch was finished, I dressed the little girls in their new hats and coats, wriggled their fingers into new gloves, saw to it that there was not a crease in their stockings nor a chink in the lacing of their boots, and had just settled them on the sofa in the drawing-room to wait quietly until I rushed through my own hasty toilette, when—the door opened, and who should walk in but Ralph Maplestone himself!

For different reasons his appearance struck consternation into the breasts of all three beholders. I was naturally overcome with embarrassment as to what he had come for now; the little girls were seized with a devastating fear lest his arrival should interfere with their treat. They leapt to their feet, and rent the air with protestations.

“Oh, oh! It's the Same Man!”

“We're going out! We're going out! We've got on our hats.”

“To the Zoo! So's Miss Harding. She's just going to put on her hat.”

“It's our treat. Father's away. He's having a treat, and she promised—she promised we could go!”

Tears sounded in the voices, showed in suspicious redness round the eyes. Mr. Maplestone smiled—like many grave people he has a beautiful smile—he laid one big hand on the top of each little hat, and swayed them gently to and fro.

“Well, and why not? Of course you are going! All good little girls go to the Zoo, and ride on the elephants, and throw buns to the bears. You are extra good little girls, and so you can see something else—a little bird, not much bigger than a canary, who can talk and say words almost as well as you can yourselves. And think of the monkeys!”

He withdrew one hand and held it out to me across the children's heads, smiling and apologetic.

“I'm afraid I am looked upon as an obstacle. Please don't let me detain you. I would not disappoint them for the world. I can call another day.”

But by this time fear had given place to gratitude and the quick affection which children show to grown-ups who understand! Winifred and Marion leapt at his arms, clung, wheedled, and implored.

“You come too! You come too! Show us the bird that talks. We want you. We want you to come with us. Miss Harding wants you. You *do* want him, don't you, Miss Harding?”

The leap of my heart showed that I did! The very suggestion had been enough to give an altogether different aspect to the expedition; to invest it with a spice of adventure, not to say romance, which was most refreshing to a spinster living in a basement flat! I fought down an inclination to laugh, *hoped* that I conquered an inclination to blush, and said primly:—

"My dears, you must not be exacting. Mr. Maplestone has no doubt engagements——"

"Not one!" he contradicted eagerly. "Not one! Please let me come, Miss Harding. It would be a charity, for if you turn me away I shall be at a loose end all the afternoon. I am like a fish out of water in town!"

"You should return to the country," I said sternly. "It is wasting time to remain here."

The children caught at the last sentence, naturally applied it to their own plans, and pranced with renewed impatience.

"Yes! Yes! You said directly after-lunch. Put on your hat, Miss Harding—do put it on! We want to see the bird."

He looked at me, lifted his eyebrows, and smiled as if to say that further protest was useless, and indeed it seemed that it was. There was nothing for it but to retire to my room, and put on the boat-shaped hat, the thick, unbecoming veil, and the badly-cut coat, which aided my outdoor disguise.

I looked plain to a degree. Nothing in the world can disfigure a woman more successfully than an unbecoming hat and a cheap black veil, which imparts a dingy, leaden tint to the complexion. I had every reason to be satisfied with my disguise that afternoon, but I wasn't. Not a bit! I felt cross, and irritated, and balked!

We took a taxi and drove straight to the Albert

Road entrance, made our way down the steep incline, under the bridge, and up again towards the lion houses. Marion and Winifred hung, one on each of Ralph's arms, chattering in a continuous stream. Child-like, they ignored me in the fascinations of a new friend; also—and this interested me very much!—he was charming with them, hitting just the right combination of sense and nonsense, entering into their ideas, and adapting himself with an enjoyment which was obviously real, not feigned. I reminded myself that this was the first time I had seen him in the company of children.

Mem. Every woman ought to see a man in several circumstances before she accepts him as a husband.

1. In his own home.
2. With his dependents. With children and old people. With his best friend.
3. When he is angry.
4. Tried by the money test.
5. Flirted with by a woman prettier than herself.

We visited the larger animals in turns, and whenever there was a seat the Squire thoughtfully pressed me to sit down, while the children pranced about to let off the steam of their enjoyment. After a few minutes he invariably joined me, and led the conversation to the same topic. Above the roar of the lions, above the jabber of the monkeys, he shouted in my ears to know if I were still obdurate.

Wouldn't I help him? Why wouldn't I help him? If I really loved Evelyn, and cared for her welfare, how could I stand aside? I must see—surely I must see that she belonged to the essentially feminine type of women who needed a home!

"I believe there are many women nowadays who are honestly satisfied with an independent career, but she is not one. She is made to love and be loved. She needs a man to look after her."

"The right kind of man!" I said primly. "I agree with your diagnosis, Mr. Maplestone, but Evelyn's nature makes it peculiarly essential that she should make a wise choice. If her marriage was a failure, she would suffer greatly. No one but herself can decide who is the Right Man."

Feeding hour was approaching; a furious outburst of roars proclaimed the lions' knowledge of the fact. Mr. Maplestone leant his arm on the back of the seat and shouted into my ear:—

"But you know her so well; she has spoken to you. There could be no harm in giving me some hints. Some things might be altered, though others could not. Does she think me an ugly brute?"

His face was close to mine. I looked at the blunt features, the clear, healthful tints, and found nothing that offended my eye.

As I had realised in Mr. Hallett's presence, expression counts for more than mere correctness of outline. I turned aside and shook my head.

"The question of appearance does not count. In that respect you have the one qualification which a woman demands."

"Which is?"

"Manliness—strength. Evelyn would care little for handsome features."

He sighed relief.

"Disposition then! I made a bad impression at our first meeting. My temper is hasty. I dislike opposition, but if we loved one another we should agree. There would be no opposition."

I smiled at his innocence. It is astonishing how guileless these big, strong men can be. I was about to undeceive him, but before I had time to speak the children were back with a rush, dragging at our arms, and demanding to move on. For the next half hour we had no private conversation, but at the first chance he began once more.

"Evelyn has been accustomed to the country. I could give her the life she likes. If she wished it I would take a house in town for the season. To a certain extent I believe in women's rights. I should not interfere with her pursuits. I should want her to be happy in her own way."

"Always providing that her husband was the chief consideration, and came before everything else?"

"Of course!" he cried loudly. "Why, of course! What else could you expect?"

I waved my thick dogskin gloves.

“Oh, Mr. Maplestone, what is the use of arguing? It all comes back to the one thing. If she loved you the other things would adjust themselves. Without love, without sympathy, all would go wrong.”

“There is sympathy. She may not realise it, perhaps, but if she thinks, if you ask her to think, she must acknowledge that, in spite of small surface disagreements, our real selves have drawn together, closer and closer. Ask her if she feels to me as she does towards other men? If there seems no difference between us? I know she does not love me—*yet*; but if she gave me my chance, I could make her. No, she would not need to be made. You can at least tell her that.”

Mr. Hallett's words sounded warningly in my ears. I hesitated, weakly compromised.

“Yes—I might go so far. She shall hear what you say, and judge for herself. And now we have really talked enough. Suppose we hear your bird for a change?”

An hour later we drove to Fuller's and indulged in tea. It was curiously enough the sight of one of the well-known angel cakes which recalled Delphine Merrivale to my memory, for she had shown a child-like appreciation of these dainties when they had appeared on our tea-table at “Pastimes”. Poor little Delphine! I felt a pang of compunction when I remembered what store she had set on my friend-

ship, and how little, how very little, I had concerned myself about her during the last months! With due caution I proceeded to seek information.

"I hope the tenants at 'Pastimes' are well, and the Vicar and his wife—that pretty little 'Delphine' of whom Evelyn is so fond?"

"The Vicar is not well; been ailing all autumn, but Delphine is going strong. Quite launched out this autumn. Become quite a leader of fashion in our small world."

I felt another pang—of foreboding this time, and said sharply:—

"How very unsuitable! Are you speaking figuratively, Mr. Maplestone? Surely a clergyman's wife——"

"Clergymen's wives differ, Miss Harding, as greatly as the wives of other members of society. They are not turned out by a machine, and this particular one is very young, and not particularly wise."

"Apparently not. In what way has she 'launched out'?"

"Oh—h——" he vaguely waved his hands. "Smart clothes, you know. Lots of 'em. Dinner parties. Luncheons. Less parish work, and more amusement. Always trotting over to the 'Moat'."

The present owners of the "Moat" were rich City people who gave lavish entertainments, and obviously chose their friends with a consideration

of how much amusement could be counted upon in return. Pretty, gay Delphine was a valuable addition to a house party, and would no doubt receive as many invitations as she cared to accept; but the influence could not be good. Continual association with smart, worldly people would of a certainty heighten her discontent, and lure her into extravagance.

I munched my cake in gloomy silence, which was not lightened by the next remark.

“I’m sorry for Delphine’s sake that—she—is away! If you worry it out, this development is her doing. She ought to be there to put on the brake!”

“What do you mean? In what possible way is Evelyn to blame?”

“Who spoke of blame? I didn’t! It is natural to her to be dainty and beautiful. She has the money, and she has the taste. What is wrong for the wife of a poor man is a virtue in a rich woman. Even I—a man—who never noticed such things before, found pleasure in her clothes. She had one blue muslin——”

He looked at me with dumb, awed eyes. Surely never did a muslin gown at somewhere about a shilling a yard, reap such a harvest of appreciation. I shall preserve that dress in lavender and rose leaves for evermore.

“Until She came, Delphine had the field to her-

self in our little village. Any comparisons must have been in her favour. Then suddenly she found herself up against a new standard. Being young and—er—*vain*, she evidently felt it necessary to her peace of mind to follow the leader. From a spectacular point of view the effect is good.”

Spectacular indeed! I was too perturbed, too anxious to speak. Evidently Delphine had been going in for an orgie of extravagance; a pretty serious one too, since it had attracted the attention of a mere man; and some of the responsibility seemed to fall on my own shoulders! I determined to write her a letter that very night, and in absent-minded fashion began to compose its sentences as I poured out second cups of tea. “Although I have not written, you must not think that I have forgotten you. I am leading a busy life, and have little time to spare, but if you should ever need me; if there ever comes a time when you feel I can be of real help, write to me through my lawyers, and I could meet you in town, or even run down for the day.”

Yes, that would do! That would open the way for confidences, if she were in a mood to make them. In any case, I should feel more satisfied in my own mind when I had sent off the message, and shown that I was to be found if needed.

Looking up suddenly from the tea tray I beheld Ralph Maplestone smiling to himself across the

table, with precisely the same mysterious accession of complaisance that I had noticed on his first visit to the flat. Our eyes met, and he turned aside, drawing in his lips to hide the smile, but the light danced in his eyes, and refused to be quenched.

Most mysterious and perplexing! His moods are evidently very variable. I am glad he was pleased, but I should very much like to know why!

CHAPTER XXII

MRS. MERRIVALE'S APPEAL

EVERY one has noticed that the thought of a friend after a spell of forgetfulness is frequently the harbinger of a sudden meeting, or of the receipt of a letter or message. Such happenings are called "curious coincidences"; but personally I don't consider them curious at all, or at least no more curious than it is to send a message by telephone, and to hear in reply a familiar voice speaking across the space. When the heart sends forth a wireless message of love and goodwill, surely, if we have in any sense grasped the wonderful power of thought, we must believe that the message reaches its destination, and calls forth a response! Right thoughts—thoughts of love and pity and helpfulness—are prayers winged to heaven and earth; bad thoughts—mean and grudging and censorious—well, they injure the person who thinks them so much, that there can't be much poison left for the recipient. In any case, such leaden things can't rise.

This moralising leads up to the fact that while my

own letter to Delphine lay unfinished on my desk, a note arrived from Ralph Maplestone, to give me grave news of her husband.

"I am summoned home," he wrote, "in my capacity of vicar's warden. While I have been in town, poor Merrivale has had an attack of influenza, which has been pretty serious, and has left him rather alarmingly weak. I insisted upon calling in a consultant from B——, whose verdict is that the lungs are seriously threatened. I have feared it for some time, and am glad that he is now forced to take care. He is ordered complete rest, and is to get out of England for the spring months. I shall be kept busy here for some weeks, but expect to run up to town for a day's business now and then, when I will give myself the pleasure of calling on you. Meanwhile, will you kindly pass on the news to Miss Wastneys. I know she will be interested.

"I rely on you to fulfil your kind promise."

By the same post came a letter from Charmion, tentatively breaking the news that she would not return for Christmas. Several minor reasons had contributed to this decision, but the big one was that she was still "working out her cure" and could do it better in solitude. What about me? Would I go to Ireland? Could I work in a visit to friends? Rather than think of me sitting alone in my dreary little flat, she would put everything on one side, and come rushing home.

“Dreary little flat, indeed!” I looked round the dainty, rose-lit room, and laughed a derisive laugh. It was strange. I did not feel a bit depressed. Life in the basement flat was very full, very interesting, of late days thrillingly exciting into the bargain. I was not at all sure that I wanted to go back to “Pastimes” so soon. Christmas in the flat offered endless possibilities. I would have a tree! Mrs. Manners should help me. Her children would come, and all the Thorolds, and their father, and Mr. Hallett. There should be lots of toys, and lots of baubles, but useful things too! Things which should truthfully be “just what I wanted!” Perhaps I would be noble and forgiving and ask Eric and Claudia and Moreen. Poor mites, it wasn’t their fault that their mother wore false pearls! The tree should be on Christmas Eve, and on Christmas night I would invite the grown-ups to dinner, and give them a light, dainty feast, with never a shadow of roast beef or plum pudding! They could do their duty by convention at the mid-day meal.

In two minutes’ time I had thought out the whole menu, even the decorations on the table. What fun it would be! How they would all enjoy it! How little Mrs. Manners would revel in the shopping expeditions! Her present should be a pretty blouse—something pretty, bought with a view to what is becoming, and not to what will be

useful, and wear for several seasons, and then cut up into dusters. An occasional extravagance is such a tonic to a feminine mind! As for the men, Mr. Thorold should have a box of cigars. Mr. Hallett should have the same. And in the deadliest secrecy I would commission each to buy for the other. Then they would be sure to get the right brand.

As for "Pastimes"—our guest tenant would be delighted to have her stay extended. I wondered if the gardener would pine for Bridget! I wondered if—*anyone*—would pine for me! Personally the prospect of occasional "calls" pleased me better than the thought of meetings in the country, under the Argus eye of village gossips. In the latter case one would be self-conscious and restrained; in the former, safe from observation, doubly sheltered behind wig and spectacles, there could be no doubt as to which position afforded the better opportunity of getting to know a man's character.

I wrote a letter to Charmion, reassuring her as to Christmas in my "dreary flat"; I tore up the unfinished note to Delphine, and sent another, assuring her of my sympathy, repeating my offers of help. Poor little girl! Her real love for "Jacky" would be in the ascendant now, and all the pleasure and vanities for which she had pined would seem trivial things, compared with his dear life.

I did not write to Mr. Maplestone. The difficulty

of handwriting came in, and there was no real necessity to answer his note. If I knew Delphine, she would find it a relief to pour forth her woes on paper. I waited confidently for a letter to appear.

Two days passed by, three; I was growing anxious, and debating if I should write again, when there came a loud rat-tat at the door, and a reply-paid telegram was handed in, addressed to Miss Wastneys:—

“Letter received. Need urgent. Unable to leave. Can you come to-morrow. Beg you not to refuse. DELPHINE.”

I seized a pencil, scribbled a hasty “Expect me by train arriving twelve,” and having despatched the promise, sat down to consider how I was to keep it. What an excitement to think of feeling young again, and being able to devote my attention to looking as nice as I could, instead of laboriously contriving disfigurements! Under my bed lived a box wardrobe on wheels, in which, carefully stretched and padded to avoid creases, reposed a selection of garments which were certainly not suited to old Miss Harding’s requirement. Mentally I reviewed them, selected the prettiest and most becoming, saw a vision of myself putting the last touches before the glass, with Bridget’s beaming face watching every stage. Oh, it would be an exhilarating variety, and easy, too—perfectly easy. I would give the orphan leave of absence

for two days, and send her rejoicing to stay with "me aunt". Then in leisurely enjoyment I would make my toilette and march complacently into the street. We possess no porter in our modest mansions; ten to one I should pass through the hall unseen, and even if I had the ill-luck to encounter a neighbour—well, if my disguise is good enough to deceive Ralph Maplestone, it can surely defy less interested eyes!

Bridget was as excited as I was. She hustled the orphan out of the flat, and superintended my toilette as eagerly as though I were dressing for a wedding, instead of a country visit.

"Praise the fates, we'll see you looking yourself again! I never was in favour of this dressing up, and playing tricks with a face which anyone else would be proud to have, and to take care of. Not that you hadn't more sense than I gave you credit for! We've been a godsend to this place, and if anyone doubts it, let 'em look at the kitchen book, and see the pounds of good meat I've made into beef tea with me own hands. And you running about by day and by night, waiting on 'em all in turns. There's no doubt but we've done good, but what I say is—why not do it with your own face?"

"Don't be foolish, Bridget! I couldn't do it! Look at me now!"—I swirled round to face her, with a rustle of silk and a flare of skirts. "*Do* I look the sort of person to wheel out prams, and

give tea parties to widowers, and be looked upon as a prop and support by my neighbours?"

Bridget chuckled.

"Go away wid you then!" said she, and that was the end of the discussion.

I met no one in the hall. I met no one in the street. I jumped into a taxi at the corner and drove off to the station without running the remotest chance of detection. It was so easy that I determined to do it again! Every now and then just for a change—just to remember what it was like to look nice! I arrived at the station and took my ticket. There was no one I knew upon the platform. I walked to the further end, and took a seat in an empty first-class carriage. The collector came round and looked at the tickets; there was a banging all down the length of the train, a sharp call, "Take your seats, please; take your seats!" The door of my compartment opened and shut. Ralph Maplestone seated himself in the corner opposite mine!

"How do you do, Miss Wastneys," said he, as cool as a cucumber.

"How do you do, Mr. Maplestone," said I, as red as a beetroot.

Was it chance? Was it coincidence? Was it a deep and laborious plan? Had he heard from Delphine of my coming and rushed to town for the

express purpose of returning in my company? It looked very like it. My wire could not have arrived at the Vicarage until after five in the afternoon, and the next train to town left at nine p.m. There was also an early morning one at eight-thirty. My brain seethed with curious questions, but there seemed only a moment's pause before I spoke again:—

“Have you been staying in town?”

“Er”—his eyes showed a faint flicker of amusement—“not long. You are going down to see Delphine, I suppose. That's good of you. She needs bucking up. The Vicar's pretty bad, but with rest and change there's no reason why he shouldn't pick up. We are arranging to make things easy for them. It will do him no good if she makes herself miserable.”

“That's the sort of futile remark that outsiders generally make on these occasions. They make me furious!” I cried, glad of an excuse to work off my self-consciousness in a show of indignation. “Perhaps it won't; but as he belongs to her, and she loves him, she can hardly be expected to be happy! In illness all the sympathy is lavished on the invalid. In reality, the relations are more to be pitied. It's far easier to lie still and bear physical pain than it is to be wracked with anxiety, and fatigue, and responsibility all at the same time.”

He said, looking at me with an air of the most profound attention:—

"You are thinner than you were. Your face is thinner——"

"We were not talking about my face. How long has Mr. Merrivale really been ill?"

"It's difficult to say. He is the sort of fellow who never thinks about himself, and Delphine is not—not exactly noticing! I fancy she blames herself now; but he never complained, and always went on working at full pressure, till this attack came on, and he went down with a crash."

"And now? How does he seem now?"

His forehead wrinkled into lines.

"Depressed. Nervous. Inclined to be jumpy. He has lived for his work, and hates the idea of giving up, even for a time. He has overtaxed his strength for years, and his nerves are bound to play up. However, once we get them off to the sun, he'll soon pull round."

"And when do they——"

"As soon as possible. It is Delphine who is putting things off. So far as Merrivale himself is concerned, the sooner he starts the better. He'll not grow any stronger where he is. When are you coming back to 'Pastimes'?"

"It's uncertain. Not before Christmas. Is your mother quite well?"

"Quite, thanks. You know that I have made Miss Harding's acquaintance. She is a charming old lady."

"I'm so glad you like her. I knew you had called. Nice little flat, isn't it?"

He growled, his face eloquent with disapproval.

"If you call it 'nice' to live burrowed underground! How sane people can consent to live in town, herded together in a building more like a prison than a home——"

"'The goodness and the grace' did not make us *all* country squires!" I said shortly, whereat he laughed—quite an easy, genial laugh, and twinkled at me with his blue eyes. It was extraordinary how natural and at his ease he appeared; so different from the stiff, silent man I had known at Escott!

The journey takes exactly sixty minutes, and we talked the whole way. For the first twenty minutes I was on my guard, nerving myself to say "No" for the second time, with due firmness and finality. For the next twenty I was friendly and natural. He was behaving so well that he deserved encouragement. During the third twenty I said less, stared out of the carriage window, and felt a disagreeable feeling of irritation and depression. He went on talking about books and gardens and parish difficulties, and I wasn't interested one bit. One may not wish a man to propose to one for the second time; but, with the echo of vows of undying devotion ringing in one's ears, it is rather daunting to go through an hour's *tête-à-tête* without one personal remark! He had said that I was

thin. Perhaps he found me changed in other ways. Perhaps on meeting me again he found he did not like me as much as he had believed. Perhaps he was glad that I had said "No". We parted at the Vicarage gate; he apparently quite comfortable and composed, I in the lowest depths. What a change from last time!

The door opened, and before I had time to blink Delphine's arms were round me, and a hot, wet cheek pressed against mine. She was sobbing in a hard, breathless way which made my heart leap; but even on the way to her sitting-room I gathered that my first fear was unfounded.

"Jacky was—the same! In bed. So tired—always so tired! Seems to care for nothing. Hardly even"—the blue eyes opened in incredulous misery—"for *me*!"

"When people are very weak, they can't care. It takes strength even to love—at least, to realise that one loves. I never knew a man who adored his wife more than Mr. Merrivale does you; but I expect it suits him better just now to lie quietly and snooze rather than to hold your hand and watch you cry."

She looked guilty at that, and tossed her head with a spice of her old spirit. But the next moment her breath caught in a sob, and she cried desperately:—

"Oh, Evelyn, it's all awful! Other things—everything—far worse than you know. I'm the most

miserable creature in the world. I think I shall go mad. I sent for you because——”

“Hold hard for one moment! I'm hungry! I need my lunch! So do you, by the look of you. Shall we have it first, and tackle the serious business afterwards in your room, where we shan't be interrupted. There will be plenty of time; I needn't leave till five.”

“I ordered cutlets, and an omelette, and coffee afterwards. All the things you liked best when you were here. But I can't eat a bite. It would choke me. I hate the sight of food.”

“Very well then—you can watch me eat mine,” I said, with the callousness of one who had heard dozens of people declare the same thing, and then watched them tuck into a square meal. Delphine proved another protestor to add to the list. She ate her share of the meal with no sign of choking, and brightened into acutest interest at hearing of my escort from town. The fork stopped half-way to her mouth; her eyes widened to saucer size. In the sheer surprise of the moment she forgot her grief and anxieties.

“But—but—how *could* he be there? He was here last night. Quite late. Ten o'clock. Walked down after dinner to hear how Jacky was!”

I made a vague sweeping gesture, which was designed to express a lack of all responsibility concerning the Squire's eccentricities, but Delphine's

suspensions were aroused, and she was not to be easily put off.

"He must have gone up by the workman's train. And yours left at eleven. How very peculiar! And he said nothing last night. . . . Did I tell him you were coming?" She wrinkled her brows in the effort to remember. "Yes, I did. He said something about taking me for a drive to freshen me up, and I said you would be here before lunch. Evelyn, he couldn't possibly have gone to meet you!"

Evidently she suspected nothing. I tried to look composed and natural, and said lightly:—

"It seems preposterous, doesn't it. He certainly did not say so."

She stared at me curiously.

"What did you talk about? About us? Did he say anything about me?"

"Of course. What do you suppose? We had quite an argument, because he seemed to think it a pity that you should injure yourself by fretting, and I said I didn't see how you could do anything else."

She smiled, and tilted her head, her complacency restored.

"That was it, I suppose! He wanted to talk to you before you saw me. He is good. And you argued with him, you say? Disagreed, I suppose. Oh, well—men are always more tender-hearted than women."

I felt annoyed, and munched in silence, staring fixedly at my plate. If this particular man was so

much more understanding, why had she summoned me from town?

After lunch Delphine ran upstairs to see her husband for a few minutes, and then returned to me in her little sitting-room. He was tired, she said, and hoped to sleep until tea. She had not told him of my visit; he was so listless and apathetic that it worried him to talk, or to have people talk to him. "I don't believe he will ever be the same again!"

"People always say that in the middle of an illness, but they find their mistake later on. After a long rest the Vicar will be better than he has been for years, and it will be your business to see that he never works so hard again. You were always longing for a change, Delphine. Think how you will enjoy Switzerland, sitting out in the crisp clear air, looking at those glorious mountains, with no house or parish to worry over—nothing to do but wait on your dear man, and watch him growing stronger every day!"

She looked at me dumbly, while the colour faded out of her cheeks, and the pretty curved lips twitched and trembled. I saw her clasp her hands, and brace herself against her chair, and knew that the moment for confession had come, and that it was difficult to find words.

"No worry!" she repeated slowly. "No worry! But that's just what is killing me. I'm so worried, so worried that I feel sometimes, Evelyn, as if I were going out of my mind!"

"You mean—about your husband?" I asked, but the question was really put as a lead; I knew she was not referring to illness.

Delphine shook her head.

"That is bad enough, but it is not the worst. The worst is that through me—through my wretched, selfish, vain, discontented folly, I—I have made it difficult for him even to get well. I—I have got into a horrible mess, Evelyn, and when he hears of it—when he has to hear, he will be so worried, so miserable, so disappointed, that it will bring on a relapse, and he will probably be worse than before. We can neither of us be happy again—never, never, any more!"

"Sounds pretty bad!" I said, startled. "But there must be some way out, or you would not have sent for me to help you. You are going to tell me the whole truth, Delphine! Half confidences are no use. You will speak honestly, and—let me speak honestly to you?"

"Oh, yes! You *will* do, whether I allow you or not. I know you!"

"Well, then"—I bent forward, staring full in her face—"let's get to the point. Is it another man?"

Her face answered, without the need of words. Amazed resentment blazed out of her blue eyes.

"Another man! I should think not! How hateful of you, Evelyn! I'm despicable enough, but I

love Jacky. There's no other man in the world for me. Of course," she paused, and faintly smiled, as at a soothing recollection, "people admire me. I can't help that, and there's no harm so long as I don't flirt. There's the Squire. I think if I were not married, he might want—but I *am* married, and it's the honest truth that I've never said a word to a man since our marriage that I shouldn't be willing for Jacky to hear. No! it's not that——"

"It's money, then," I said quickly. (So the Squire would "want," would he? Oh, indeed!) "Delphine! you have been getting into debt?"

"Oh, how did you guess?" She turned her head over her shoulder, as though afraid some one might overhear. "Oh, Evelyn, nobody knows but you. I think I have been mad. Goodness knows what I expected to happen in the end. I was in a crazy, rebellious mood, tired to death of being dull and careful, and I had a wild spell of extravagance, ordered whatever I wanted, ran up bills in town. I went to your dressmaker. I was sick of making my own clothes, and looking a frump. I'm young, and I'm pretty, I wanted to look nice while I could. Every one said I *did* look nice; but she is a terror, that woman of yours! I had no idea of the bill!"

"You did not ask for estimates in advance?"

"How could I? I didn't even know what to order. I just said, 'A pretty dress for the afternoon.' 'A hat with roses.' 'An evening cloak.'

Descriptions like that. And there was the habit, too, and little things—oddments. They grow into mountains! And I bought furniture to make my room look pretty and homelike. You remember you said I deserved to have one nice room!”

Apparently this extravagance also could be traced to my influence! It was useless to waste any more words. I went straight to the point.

“How much?”

“Oh!” she started and shivered. “I’m ashamed to say. And now—we are going away, and the bills have to be paid. I’m a new customer, and they keep sending them in. And the house books! They have run on. Jacky gave me some money. I *meant* to pay them, honestly I did, Evelyn, but somehow the money frittered away till there wasn’t enough left. I paid some—but there are others left. Jacky would hate it, if we left the parish in debt.”

“How much?” I repeated, and she flushed to the roots of her hair.

“Over—a hundred! Nearer—*two*, I’m afraid, Evelyn!”

It was more than I had expected. I had to make fresh calculations, and revise several plans. Subconsciously, I had known that the trouble was monetary, and had made a special study of my pass book before leaving the flat.

“I can let you have a hundred at once, and settle the rest of the bills for you next month, if that will do.”

She looked at me with tear-filled eyes.

"Do you think I deserve it?"

"I'm not sure that you do, but Mr. Merrivale *does*! He shan't have any new worry just now, if I can prevent it. You are sure you have told me everything, Delphine? That is *all*!"

"I'll show you the bills. I knew you would help. You were the only person I could bear to ask; but you did not wait to be asked. I do love you, Evelyn, and I shall never forget! You understand, don't you, that it is only a loan? I shall pay you back!"

"I know you will, when you can. It's a comfort that you need not hurry. I can wait for years."

"You will have to, I'm afraid. Three years! I hadn't a penny of my own when I married, but an old aunt left us all two hundred and fifty pounds, to be paid when we were twenty-five. That's my fortune! Jacky teases me about it, for I was always planning what I will do when it comes. I had decided to buy a tiny two-seater, and learn to drive. I told him that it would be useful in the parish, but really I was thinking of the fun for myself. Are you shocked?"

"Not a bit!"

"Well, it would be a waste of energy if you were, for I shall never have it now. The money will go to repay you—and to pay interest on the loan. I shall pay five per cent."

"I only get four."

"I insist upon five! I should like to feel that you

had made a good investment." She waved her hand with a lordly air which made me laugh. And she laughed, too, with obvious enjoyment. "Oh, my dear, what a relief! I shall sleep happily to-night for the first time for weeks. I can never tell you how wretched I've felt; so worried, and guilty, and trapped! Honestly it will be a lesson for life. You have helped me for the moment, but my worst punishment is to come. When he is well again, quite strong and fit, I must tell Jacky!" Her face clouded. "He won't say much, but his face! It will be an awful ordeal, but I suppose it will be good for me!"

I thought—but did not say—that it would be good for him too. The shock might teach him to be more understanding in his treatment of his girl wife.

Soon after that I suggested paying a flying call on the General, and Delphine assented eagerly, no doubt feeling, as I did myself, that it would be a relief to be spared a further *tête-à-tête*. The dear old man was delighted to see me, and was eager to hear when Charmion and I were coming back to "Pastimes". Something in his manner, in the way his old eyes searched my face, made me suspect that he knows.

I travelled to town alone, and arrived at the flat feeling tired and dispirited. Bridget wanted to know if I had seen anything of her man. She also seemed a trifle out of temper.

"Some people," she said darkly, "don't know when they are well off!"

CHAPTER XXIII

A BRUTE—AND A REVELATION

CHRISTMAS has come and gone. The little girls left us a fortnight before, and the flat felt very quiet without them, but I busied myself arranging for the fray. The tree was a huge success; so was the dinner next day. Nevertheless, I shed tears on my pillow when I went to bed, for if a solitary woman is ever justified in feeling "lone and lorn," it is certainly at the season when everybody who possesses a family rushes to it as a matter of course.

It was very gratifying to have made other people happy, but I had a hungry longing to be made happy myself. By an unfortunate coincidence, neither Kathie's greeting, nor Charmion's, nor Delphine's, arrived until the twenty-seventh, and Aunt Eliza's turkey never arrived at all, having presumably lost its label, and been eaten by the postman as treasure trove. The one and only parcel from a distance came from—Mr. Maplestone! He had called the week before, and asked permission to send evergreens from the "Hall". He said it was so difficult to get holly with berries on it in town, and

all children loved red berries. Presumably his trees grew crackers as well as berries, for about a dozen boxes of the most gorgeous varieties were enclosed in the crate. There was no letter, but just a card with "For the children," written in a corner.

On Boxing Day I made Winifred and Marion write letters of thanks—a weary process from which they emerged splattered with tears and ink.

"Why are you laughing, Miss Harding?" they inquired resentfully. I did not tell them that I was chuckling at my own cleverness in avoiding a personal acknowledgment. I did not know that the Squire had ever seen my writing, but he might have done. No risks should be run.

Delphine and her husband are settled at Davos, and he is beginning to improve. She writes sweet little letters, and I'm sure this illness has arrived at a providential moment. The shock of realising that her Jacky's life was in danger was like a lightning flash lighting up a dark landscape. In its blaze she saw revealed the true value of things, and the sloping path on which her feet were set. I don't expect her to grow up all at once, settle down to all work and no play, and behave as though she were forty instead of twenty-two; I don't expect the Vicar to give up being absent-minded and exacting; but I do honestly believe that it will do him good to have his shock, and that he is just enough to realise his own share of the blame. Then they will kiss

and begin again, and things will go better, because there will be understanding to leaven love.

Talking of understandings, there was a marvellous calm in the flat overhead for some nights in early January, and Bridget informed me that Mr. Nineteen had been taken to a nursing home to have an operation. Since our tragic encounter, Mrs. Nineteen (her real name is Travers) and I have exchanged furtive bows when we have met in the hall. I always felt guilty, and anxious to "make it up," and had an instinct that she felt the same, though neither had the courage to speak; but, of course, after the operation I had to stop and inquire. She flushed, and said, "Pretty well, thank you. The doctors are satisfied, but it will be a long cure." A week later I met her coming in with a book under her arm. She had been "reading aloud. Her husband felt the time so long. For an active man, it was a great trial to lie in bed." To judge by her face, it was an exhausting experience to his wife to sit by his side. I said impetuously: "If Mr. Travers would allow me, I should be so glad to read aloud to him sometimes, when you are not able to go. I am fond of reading aloud; I believe I do it pretty well."

"I don't," she said dejectedly. "It makes me yawn. John says I mumble." She looked at me sharply, distrustfully. "You are very kind, but—it's too much! Why should you——"

"I'd like to, if you will let me. I—I was rude to

you—that day! I've been remorseful ever since. If you'd allow me to do this, I should feel that I was forgiven."

"You spoke the truth," she said shortly. "And. I brought it on myself. I had no business to complain about those poor children, knowing why they were here; but there are some moods in which one is bound to have a vent. You hurt my pride, of course, but—it's not the first time!" She bit her lip, turned aside for a moment, then added quickly, "I didn't tell John!"

"Thank you. I'm glad of that. He'll be more willing to let me come. Please tell him that I'm so sorry to have disturbed him, and want to "make up" by helping him while he is ill. My time is my own. I can go any day—at any time—to read any book."

She made no promise, and for several days seemed to avoid meeting me face to face, then one morning she came to the door and asked to see me. Some business had arisen which necessitated a day out of town. Her husband dreaded being left alone. Did I really mean my kind offer, and if so would to-morrow afternoon——

I went. He is a dark, sharp-featured man, with thick eyebrows and a chronic scowl. He also looks shockingly ill, and is growing a beard. The combination is enough to strike terror into the feminine soul. The very maid who opened the door looked pityingly at me when I pronounced his name; as for

his nurse, she fairly bounced with relief when I was announced. Her expression said as plainly as words, "I've had my turn—now you can have yours!"

"Harding?" he said graciously. "Oh, yes! You are the woman who bangs the doors." He let me read for two hours on end, and then said, "Stupid book. I can't think how they ever get published!" but when I left, he asked, "When will you come again?" which was as far in the way of thanks as it is possible for him to get.

For the next three weeks I went constantly to the Home, and never once did that man say a gracious word. If I arrived late, he growled and said, "Thought you were never coming! Hardly worth beginning at all." If I was early, his greeting was, "I was just having a nap! Haven't closed my eyes since two this morning, and now you have roused me up!" If I read a book, he preferred a newspaper. If I read a newspaper, it crackled, and worried his head. If I made a remark, he disagreed; if I was silent, "Was there *no* news?—*nothing* going on to tell a poor wretch tied to his bed?" If I said he looked better, he would have me to know that nurses and doctors alike were deluding him with lies. He knew for a fact that he was dying fast. If I said he looked tired, he felt better than he had done all the week. It was impossible to please him—impossible to win a smile or a gracious word. Never have I met a human

being so twisted and warped in mind. To go into his room is like entering a black tunnel—one leaves it with the feeling of breaking bonds. The matron of the Home is a brisk, capable woman, with a face full of kindly strength; we generally met and exchanged a few words on stairs or landing, and it was easy to see that her patience was wearing thin. There came a day when she met me with a red face, beckoned me into her private room, and poured forth a stream of angry confidences.

“I really must speak to some one about Mr. Travers. His poor wife has enough to bear. I can’t trouble her. The man is insufferable; he upsets the whole house. His nurse has just been to me in tears. Nothing will please him. He rings his bell all day, and half the night, and for nothing—literally nothing! Just an excuse to give trouble. We have honestly done our best—more than our best. With such a patient it is easier to give in than to protest, but I’m beginning to think we’ve been wrong. He is not getting on as quickly as he should. I believe his temper is keeping him back.”

“I’m sure of it! You are an expert at healing, and I’m a beginner, but I’m a great believer in the power of the mind. He is poisoning himself.”

“He is poisoning every one else! I can’t submit to have my whole house upset. If he were fit to be moved, he should be out of it to-day. It’s all I

can do to be civil, and not blaze out, and tell him what I think!"

"I shouldn't try!"

"What?" She looked at me sharply. "Ah! You agree? You feel the same? You think I dare?"

"I do. I go a step further, and say it's your duty. He is a bully, and probably no one has ever dared to show him how he appears to other people, but for the time being you are in command; while he is here, he is supposed to obey. Give it to him hot and strong! Tell him that he is injuring himself, and is a misery to every one else—that you are only keeping him, because it would do him harm to be removed."

"It's true!" she cried. "It's every word true. The man is a miasma." She stared at me in sudden amaze. "Why do you laugh?"

"Oh, I was just thinking! Thinking of a man whom I used to denounce as bad-tempered! A dear, kind, thoughtful, unselfish Englishman with a—a bluster! I can never call it temper again, after knowing Mr. Travers! He has taught me a lesson."

She laughed, too, and shrugged her shoulders.

"Oh, that! I like a man with a will of his own, and the pluck to speak out. A 'bluster,' as you call it, clears the air, and is quite a healthful influence; but this other!—— Well, Miss Harding, you have given the casting vote. When are you coming again?"

"Thursday afternoon, I think. Mrs. Travers is busy then. Has to go out of town."

"That's all right! Then I'll have it out with him before lunch, and leave you to calm him down in the afternoon."

"Oh—*mean!*" I cried, but she only laughed, opened the door, and hustled me into the hall. Evidently her mind was made up.

When Thursday afternoon arrived, it found Miss Harding entering the ogre's bedroom with a smile tightly glued on her lips, and a heart beating uncomfortably fast beneath her ugly flannel blouse. From the bed a pair of gimlet-like eyes surveyed her sharply, pale lips twisted, and showed a snarl of teeth. He volunteered no remark, however, and I wasted not a second in opening my book, and beginning to read as a refuge against conversation. I could feel the scrutiny of his eyes on my face, but I read on steadily, never looking up for nearly an hour, when the story came to an end.

"Have you had enough reading for to-day, or would you care to hear one of the articles in this review?"

He glared at me, and said coldly:—

"So you are in the conspiracy, too! Women are all alike! Sitting here, all smiles and flummery to my face, and then going away to abuse me behind my back!"

"That's not true!" I cried hotly. "At least,

it's a very unfair representation. There was no necessity for me to come here at all. I have done it because you were a neighbour, and ill, and I wanted to help you—and even more to help your wife. As for 'smiles and flummery,' as you express it, there has been no chance of anything so friendly. You have allowed no chance!"

"You don't deny, I suppose, that you joined with matron in abusing me as a monster of wickedness?"

"I said you had the worst temper I had ever met. So you have. I said I believed that you poisoned yourself, as well as every one near you. So I do. All the more credit to me for giving you so much of my time."

He lay silent, staring into my face. It was plain that the man had received a shock. For once in his life he had been shown a picture of himself as others saw him, and in the seeing *something* had been hurt—conscience, vanity, *amour-propre*—it was impossible to say which, and now his brain was at work, trying to assimilate the new thought. All the time I had been reading, he had been pondering and raging. Probably he had not heard a single word.

"You women," he began again. "You women! Talk of ministering angels—all very fine for a few days, while the novelty lasts—after that a poor beggar can suffer tortures, and get nothing but revilings for bad temper. Would you be an angel

of meekness if you had to go through what I am bearing now?"

"I should probably be exceedingly difficult and fretful. At times! There would be other times—especially when I was getting better—when I should feel overflowing with gratitude, and should say so, to the people who had been patient with me through the bad times!"

"Words! Words!" he snarled scornfully. "Men judge by deeds. If you want my character, you can hear it from the men with whom I have had to do. I am a Churchman. I go to church every Sunday of my life. I was once Vicar's churchwarden for three years."

Poor Vicar! What those three years must have been! I have known whole parishes "set by the ears" by just one warped, self-opinionated man, who put his own pet theories before anything else, and went about sowing dissension—splitting up a hitherto united people into two opposing camps. I said, with an air of polite inquiry:—

"And—did you part good friends?"

He did not answer, but the expression on his face was eloquent enough. I *knew*, without being told. Suddenly he broke out at a fresh tangent.

"I suppose my wife——"

I held up my hand authoritatively.

"No, please! Don't blame your wife. She has never *mentioned* you, except to pity and sympathise.

Her one thought has been for you—how to help, how to please. Of course, Mr. Travers, the people here and myself have only known you lately, and this illness must have been coming on for some time. Probably it has—well, it has made you bad-tempered, hasn't it? But your wife knew you before, when you were loving and gentle, so her judgment must be more true."

With my usual "softness" I was beginning to pity the poor wretch, and to try to let him down gently; but once again his face was eloquent. At the words "loving and gentle," an involuntary grimace twisted the grim features. Memory refused to reproduce the picture. He said abruptly:—

"My wife is a good woman. That virago of a matron told me this morning that if she'd been in her place, she'd have run away years ago. Well, Mary has stuck to me. She doesn't want to go! It's not always the softest-spoken men who make the best husbands. That Hallett fellow, whom Thorold is so thick with—he belongs to my club; I knew something about him when I lived in America long ago. How do you suppose *he* treated his wife?"

"His wife? He hasn't got a wife!"

"Oh, hasn't he? Not now, perhaps. But he had! A little of him went a long way. She ran away from him on her honeymoon. What do you think of that? What kind of a man can he have been to make a woman leave him in a month?"

Something happened inside my head. There was a shock, a whirl, a blinding darkness, followed by a flash of light. Mr. Travers had said "America," and the word had a terrible significance. I sat stunned into silence, and Mr. Travers obviously gloated over my discomfiture.

"Pretty condemning, eh? She was an heiress—pots of money. Fine-looking girl, too. I saw her once. Too pale and washed out for my taste, but with an air. Forget her name—something high-flown and romantic, like herself. Well, she left him, and that was the end of it. Never heard a word of her since."

Romantic name—an heiress—fine-looking—pale. One by one the clues accumulated—step by step the evidence mounted up. I said faintly :—

"Has he tried?"

"Tried to find her? Searched the world! Almost went off his head, I believe. He'd made a mess of it, of course, but he was crazy about her—broken his heart ever since. You can see it in his face. My wife has no patience with her. She'd married for better or worse. Whatever happened, she was a poor thing to throw up the sponge in a month. What's the matter? You look faint."

"I—I am! I must go. Some other day," I gasped vaguely. I went out into the passage, and sat down on an oak chest. The world seemed rocking around me. I was so stunned that I could not *feel*!

CHAPTER XXIV

IT'S A QUEER WORLD

EDWARD HALLETT and—Charmion! Charmion and—Edward Hallett! The combination of those two names struck me dumb. Oh, it was madness—the most inconceivable, the most preposterous madness. And yet, and yet—the more I thought, the more the links seemed to “fit in”. He was of the right age, the right nationality: the few words of description which had fallen from her lips applied accurately to his appearance.

I went home, and sat in stunned silence, staring into space. I went to bed and lay awake for hours, still pondering, still puzzling. I rose in the morning, and wandered about the flat like a lost dog, unable to work, unable to rest, unable to eat. By evening I was in such a state of nerves that it seemed impossible to endure the suspense a moment longer. The prospect of another wakeful night gave the final touch to my impatience. I scribbled a note to Mr. Thorold, begging him to come down at once, and sent the orphan upstairs to deliver it.

He came at once; quite anxious and perturbed,

Was I ill? Had I had bad news? Was there anything he could do? I motioned him to a chair, and began vaguely:—

“Not bad news—at least—a shock! I’ve had a shock! It has distressed me terribly! I couldn’t sleep. It was Mr. Travers. I was reading to him again yesterday, and he said something about Mr. Hallett. It appears that he knew him years ago.”

Mr. Thorold’s face hardened. I had seen him in almost every phase of sadness and anxiety, but never with that flash in the eye, that sternness of the lips. His voice was cold and sharp.

“Travers? In-deed! And what had Travers to say? Nothing good, if I know the man.”

“He—he spoke of Mr. Hallett’s wife——”

“And you were not aware that he had a wife? It is an old story, Miss Harding; an old sore. Is it necessary to tell one’s whole life history to—er—an——”

“An acquaintance? No, no—of course not. Don’t think me presumptuous and inquisitive. I should never have mentioned it, if I had not a reason—a good reason. Have I ever seemed to pry into your affairs?”

He softened at that.

“Never! Never! You have been all that is tactful—all that is kind. I do trust you, Miss Harding, but this affair of Hallett’s gets me on the raw. He has suffered tortures. I have seen his

suffering, and I can't help feeling bitter against that woman. She—left him! That's what you heard, I suppose?"

"Yes. And so soon! It was a tragedy indeed. Mr. Thorold, will you answer just one question? It can do no harm; it can give away no secrets. What was her Christian name?"

He looked at me keenly for a moment, and then said quietly:—

"Charmion."

I lay back in my chair, and shut my eyes. Never in my life have I fainted, but I think I must have come very near it then. Everything turned black; for a moment my very heart seemed to stop. Mr. Thorold's voice sounded far away, as he cried anxiously:—

"You are ill—faint! I'll open the window—give you more air." Then with an eagerness which could not be suppressed, "You know her? Hallett's wife? Is it possible? You have met her; or—have you only heard——"

His anxiety made his voice shake. He was as much overcome as I was myself.

"For six years," he added tragically—"six years he has searched the world——"

"I—I know a Charmion. She left her husband. It may be a coincidence, but it seems strange. She had good cause——"

"Oh, I don't deny it. Enough to alienate any

woman. I don't wonder at her going—at first—but, it was cruel to give him no chance to explain."

"It was about money. He pretended to love her for herself, to know nothing about her fortune, and afterwards—a letter came. That is my Charmion's story. Is it his?"

"Yes! yes! this is a wonderful thing! That the discovery should have come through you, and that you should have appealed to me of all people—the only man on this side who can tell you the truth! Is it coincidence, Miss Harding?"

I clasped my hands to still their trembling.

"Better than coincidence! It is Providence. We have prayed for them, you and I, for the friends we love most, and now—now it seems as if through us—Oh, Mr. Thorold, explain! Explain! You believe in him still, yet you confess that he was wrong. What 'explanation' can he give!"

"I love Hallett," he said solemnly, "like a brother—more than a brother! I believe him to be, at this moment, the best man I know. We were at school together. He was the only son of a wealthy man. Until he was twenty-one he was brought up in an atmosphere of such luxury as we in England can hardly imagine. Americans are fond of going 'one better' than the rest of the world. In some cases the extravagance of their moneyed classes amounts to profligacy. Hallett's father was a notorious example for many years,

then—just as Edward came of age, there was a colossal smash; he lost everything, practically fretted himself to death, left the lad to fight his own way.

“To expect the boy to understand economy after such an upbringing was preposterous. He literally did not understand the value of money. He got into debt, more and more deeply into debt, as the years went on. I am not defending him as blameless; of course, he should have pulled up, faced the worst, and started afresh; but I do say that it was a hard test, and that he had many excuses.”

I nodded. Ideas of economy, like most other ideas, are comparative. I have never known fabulous riches, but I should manage badly as a poor woman. Up to this point I could sympathise with Edward Hallett. Mr. Thorold continued eagerly:—

“Well! just when matters were at their worst, a casual acquaintance happened to speak of a young English heiress, and it occurred to Edward for the first time that marriage might cut the knot. He arranged to meet the girl—it was a deliberate plan. Ah! I see you have heard her story; but what she evidently *did* not, would not, understand, was, that when they did meet, he fell in love with her for herself! She was his mate, his ideal, the one woman in the world who had power to awake his best self; to make him selfless, and in earnest about life. He was overcome with shame at the

remembrance of his own scheming. At one time he believed it to be his duty to punish himself by leaving her without saying a word, but his passion was too strong, and circumstances hurried on the marriage. Her aunt died——”

“Yes. She told me. Oh, but *why* did he pretend? *Why* didn't he tell her that he knew about the money?”

His face fretted into lines. He looked terribly distressed.

“Ah! that hits me hard. He wrote to me, Miss Harding—we had kept up a correspondence at intervals since our school days—and he had an exaggerated faith in my advice. His conscience was torturing him. He put the whole case to me. Should he tell her—should he confess? He hated the idea of marrying under false pretences. On the other hand he hated, as any lover would hate, to lower her opinion, perhaps to plant the seeds of future suspicions. Her silence as to her own wealth seemed to show that she had dreaded a mercenary love, that it was sweet to her to feel that he was in ignorance. He guessed that she was storing up the news as a sweet secret to be revealed to her husband. Well, as I say, he put the whole case before me, and I—I advised him to keep silent. He had wronged her in intent, but not in deed, for no man could love more deeply, more disinterestedly than he then loved her. Every word proved that. It

was a wonderful letter, written straight from the heart——”

I interrupted in breathless haste:—

“Have you got it? Did you keep it? Can you find it now?”

To my unspeakable relief he nodded his head.

“I can. It's not often that I keep letters, but this was an exception. I was naturally anxious about giving the right advice. I put the letter in my pocket-book, to read and re-read. Then, just the day before the wedding, I caught a chill, was in bed for a month with pleurisy. The first news I heard on getting up was—that she had gone! At once I thought of the letter, and was thankful I had kept it; I locked it away in my safe. I felt that some day, when she was found—— Later on I wrote to her lawyers, and tried to bully them into giving me her address. I meant to send it to her myself, and force her to believe. But they swore that they knew no more than I did myself. Liars!”

“No! It was true. She was ill for months; in bed! absolutely cut off——”

“Ah, well!” He shrugged helplessly. “We were all at cross purposes, it seems. I believed that they were lying, and would continue to lie. I never tried them again. But the letter is there in my safe, and it is his best witness, Miss Harding. Where is she? How do you come to know her?”

“She's in Italy. She's coming home. To me.

She's my friend. We—we live together. Not here, but in the country. We share a house——”

He stared. I realised how incongruous the arrangement must appear. I realised something else, too, and that was that the time had come when to this man, at least, Miss Harding must show herself in her true colours. Charmion must hurry home. I must wire to demand her presence. Happiness was waiting for her, and not one day, one hour, should the darling wait in ignorance. The dreary little flat was about to become the scene of blissful reconciliation; of a new radiance of life and hope. It was not conceivable that I could mar the sacredness of such a time by masquerading in an assumed character. As Mr. Thorold was bound to know, it would simplify arrangements if he knew at once!

I jumped up, tingling with excitement, almost too impatient to speak.

“Mr. Thorold—this is a most adventurous afternoon! I have something to tell you about myself. It will explain how it comes about that Charmion and I—— Wait for me here for a quarter of an hour. I'll come back,—but there is something I must do first. You^{ll} understand when I come back. Please wait!”

I hurried out, rang for Bridget, ordered her to get rid of the orphan, and come back to help. The wardrobe was pulled from beneath the bed, off came

spectacles and wig, my face was washed free from the disfiguring marks, my hair was coiled, a dainty blue gown slipped over my head. The quarter of an hour grew into a half, the sound of pacing footsteps sounded through the wall. I laughed, slipped my feet into satin slippers, and threw open the drawing-room door.

He had his back towards me at that moment; he wheeled round, started, stared, made a curious jerking bow. His face showed no sign of recognition, only surprise and a veiled impatience.

"Mr. Thorold, I believe?" I said smiling.

His forehead knitted into lines; he stared more closely.

"Billy's father, I believe?" I said, smiling more broadly. "The man who ate up my sandwiches!"

"Oh! you—you—you minx!" he gasped loudly.

Oh! it was gloriously amusing! Edward Hallett and Charmion were nowhere for the moment; he could do nothing but gasp and stare, walk round me, examine me from one point of view and then another, gasp and exclaim again.

"You—you are Miss Harding! Miss Harding was you! Am I dreaming, or is this real life? How did you do it? *Why* did you do it? But your mouth is a different shape! This beats anything I ever knew! You used to look round-shouldered. Why? Why? *Why*? How could you be so mad?"

Then I made him sit down, and told him the whole story from the beginning ; and, like every one else, he disapproved violently at first, and then, by slow degrees, came round to my own point of view. Like Bridget, he wanted to know why I couldn't play fairy godmother to the "Mansions" with my own face ; but when I asked him if I could have done so much for *him*, he acknowledged hastily that I could not. His expression, half horrified, half shy, spoke more eloquently than his words.

"No ! you see it would not have worked. Old Miss Harding had a pull over Evelyn Wastneys. My name is Evelyn Wastneys, by the way, but that is a secret between us for the moment. And I am Charmion Fane's friend, just as you are Edward Hallett's, and the good, good God is going to give us the joy of seeing them happy together again. Mr. Thorold ! they have both been to blame, they have both had a share in spoiling their own lives—we won't give them another chance ! You and I, as staid, level-headed outsiders, are going to stage-manage their reconciliation."

"How are we going to manage it ?"

"Listen !" I said. "Listen !"

It's a queer world. It's a very queer world ! People have said so before, but I wish to say it again, to shout it aloud at the pitch of my voice.

Hardly had I changed back into Miss Harding,

and finished my evening meal, when a knock came to the door, and there entered Mrs. Travers. Furious! She had returned from her day in the country; had seen her husband that afternoon; had heard from his lips what I had dared to think and to *say*! If she had been defending a homing dove, she could not have been more outraged, more aflame. She wished me to understand, once and for all, that for the future *no* communication, no acquaintance of any kind was possible between us. She would pass me by in the street without a glance.

• Oh, very well!

CHAPTER XXV

TWO GLORIFIED BEINGS

I WIRED to Charmion, "Return at once. Urgently needed," and her reply came back with all possible speed, "Meet me Euston—Thursday". I knew she would come! She would imagine that the need was mine, and, bless her! would speed night and day to my aid. And what would she find? My reeling brain refused to realise the dramatic scenes which lay ahead!

After much cogitation I determined to close the flat, and take a small suite of rooms at an hotel for the next week. Under the circumstances, it would be a relief to be among strangers, and away from interested neighbours who might take it into their heads to pay a call at the most crucial moment, to say nothing of the orphan and her friends in adjoining flats, who would be exercised about the strange doings in the basement flat!

So it was as Evelyn Wastneys that I sallied to Euston on that eventful Thursday, and a somewhat tired and sleepy Charmion was obviously a trifle disappointed to find that she was not to be taken "home".

"I have had such a dose of hotels!"

"Darling, you talked of my 'dreary little flat!'"

"And you wrote back that it was a bower! It has suited you—it is easy to see that, and your mad scheme has been a success. You were very vague in your reports; gave me no particulars."

"You didn't want letters. For a long time you didn't write at all."

"Oh, well! Now we can talk. You must tell me all your adventures. You look well—very well! What's the trouble, Evelyn?"

"I never said it was trouble."

She looked at me sharply, fearfully. Instead of being reassured, my answer seemed to have excited her fears.

"Not trouble! Then—Evelyn! what is it? Tell me quickly. Don't quibble! Are you in love—engaged?"

"Don't be absurd. I've been Miss Harding, remember! Wait till you see me! I had lessons in making up, and I really look the part. In love, indeed!"

But I knew that my colour was mounting, I could feel the burn of it in my cheeks. Charmion's lips twitched, and her dear eyes grew misty and sad.

"It's hateful of me, but—I don't want to lose you! I'd be a lonely soul!"

I put my hand over hers, but said nothing. Her words had saddened me, for they accurately described my own feelings.

"You are well—there is no trouble—you are not in love. Then what was the urgent need?"

"Are you sorry to be here?"

"Yes! if you are going to prevaricate and hedge. I've thrown every plan to the winds to come tearing back. The least you can do——"

"I know!—I know! And I *will*—after dinner. Give me till eight o'clock, to enjoy you, and to calm my nerves. It's good news, but—it upsets our plans. I needed you here to talk over and to arrange. Can't you leave business, and just be 'homey' with me for an hour or two, after all this time?"

She laughed. How good it was to hear that soft, low laugh, and to feast my eyes on her exquisite self! Even after a two days' journey Charmion looked elegant. I believe she would look well groomed on a desert island. Some women seem born with this gift. It wasn't given to me. I can be untidy on the slightest provocation!

"Indeed I can. There's any amount of chit-chat to get through, apart from serious problems. You have done me out of my Paris shopping, Evelyn, but I've a box full of trophies for you all the same. Wherever I went, I picked up some token to prove that I remembered you all the time."

"Oh! cheers! cheers!" I cried fervently. "That's a good hearing! It is more blessed to give than to receive, but now and then, as a variety, it is refreshing to have an innings one's self!"

She laughed at that, gripped my arm, and said :—
“Oh, Evelyn, you are a dear! It's good to be with you. It's good to be back.” And we chatted in great contentment for the rest of the drive.

There were several hours to spare before dinner. I made Charmion take a bath, and then go really and truly to bed, until seven o'clock, when I woke her and issued orders for her prettiest, most becoming frock, grey, of course, a mist of silver and cloudy gauze. When she came into the little sitting-room she looked fresh and radiant—younger than I had ever beheld her. Looking at her, I was suddenly reminded of a line in one of dear Robert Louis Stevenson's beautiful prayers—“Cleanse from our hearts the lurking grudge!” How can any immortal being, made in God's own image, expect to be happy and healthful while he or she is cherishing bitter grudging feelings against a fellow-man? Charmion's battle had been a long, up-hill fight, but it was won at last. The sign of victory was in her face. Now for the victor's crown!

Dinner was cleared away. The waiter placed coffee on a small table and disappeared. Charmion piled up the cushions at one end of the sofa, nestled against them, and said smilingly :—

“*Now!* I've been very patient, but not another moment can I wait. There's an air of mystery about you, Evelyn, a muffled excitement which intrigues me vastly. Oh! you've tried very hard!

you kept up the chatter, but it's been hard work. Your thoughts have strayed; half the time you have not heard my replies. Your eyes are dark and big—dilated, like an excited child's! If you had not denied it so stoutly, I should feel convinced that there was a man——”

“My dear, this concerns you, not me. Charmion, can't you guess? It is wonderful, wonderful news. Can't you imagine whom it is about? You told me your story, but not his name—your name! When I heard it, it conveyed nothing to me. When I met him——”

She held out her hands, as if to ward off a blow. After all my fencing, the great news had come blurt-ing out, without preface or preparation. White as a sheet, she stared at me with anguished eyes.

“Met! You? Edward? You have met, and—spoken?”

“I know him well. He is a close friend, almost a brother of the man whose child was ill, and whom I helped to nurse—another tenant in the flats. I think I mentioned him—a darling child. We thought he would die. We grew intimate, comfort-ing one another, waiting day after day——”

“You mentioned me? He recognised the name?”

“No! I was Miss Harding. Evelyn and her life were things apart. I have never spoken of them to my neighbours. It was pure chance—pure Providence!”

“But he knows? You have told him. He knows I am here?”

“Not yet. You had to know first, and to hear—to *read* his defence; but he is to know to-night. His friend will tell him. It will break your heart, Charmion, for you have done him a wrong, and have wasted all these years; but it will fill you with joy as well, for at last you can believe—you *must* believe in his loyalty. It is there for you to see, in a letter to his friend, received just before you were married. Mr. Thorold has kept it—he gave it to me, so that you might see it with your own eyes.

But still she sat motionless, half paralysed, it would appear, by the suddenness, the unexpectedness of the revelation, making no effort to take the letters which I held out. I put them into her hand, speaking in slow, gentle tones:—

“Read, darling—read! There are two letters, for Mr. Thorold has drafted out the substance of his own reply. He feels that much of the responsibility lies on his shoulder. It is such a joy to him—such a joy!—to feel that he has this chance to ‘make good’. It’s not a dream, darling—it’s true! The long, long nightmare is over; read your letters and—wake up!”

I pressed the envelope into her slack hands, kissed her cold cheek, and hurried from the room. She must be alone when she read those healing words; even the dearest friend would be an intruder at that moment!

My own heart was beating at express speed as I descended the stairs, and walked along the corridors which led to the drawing-room. I did not hurry, but rather intentionally lingered by the way. The great mirrors on the walls reflected a bright-eyed, eager girl, whom even at this engrossed moment it was a pleasure to recognise as myself. I am so tired of the reflection of old Miss Harding!

In a far corner of the room the two men were waiting. Mr. Thorold came quickly forward. I nodded, and he took his friend by the arm, and led him towards the door. Edward Hallett's face was fixed—tense with emotion. He glanced neither to right nor to left—was oblivious of the outer world. Mr. Thorold was to lead him to the room where Charmion sat, close the door, and leave them face to face. Hardly would she have finished reading the letters than her husband would stand before her. Oh, what a meeting—what a meeting! What a rolling away of the stone! Thank God for giving me my share in bringing it about!

Wenham Thorold came back, and sat by my side. We were both shaking with excitement, but we talked resolutely to pass the time. I asked him if Mr. Hallett had been told of my dual personality, and he smiled, and said:—

“Oh, yes, he was interested—as much interested as he could be in anything outside! But not surprised! He and I were constantly puzzled by your

extraordinary youth! The get-up was excellent, but your manner, your movements—they did not belong to an elderly woman. Circumstances favoured you, of course! You were naturally quiet and reserved on our first meeting, and then Billy's illness cast a gloom over us all. Every one seems older in a period of anxiety; but as soon as the cloud lifted your vitality asserted itself." He looked at me anxiously. "This—this reunion will make a difference to your life? It will take away your friend."

"Yes, it will. My friends all go," I said a little bitterly. "I am trying not to think of myself, but only to rejoice for her; but it is hard!"

"That house in the country! You shared it together? Couldn't you make it your home instead of the flat? It would be more—suitable. This fairy-godmother scheme is possible for a few months, with a home in the background, to which you can return at any moment, but now that you will be alone, you are too young. It does not seem right. Couldn't you"—he looked at me apologetically—"carry on the same work in the country in your own name? Make the house a country resort for lame dogs who need a rest, for example? There would be plenty of applicants."

"It's impossible! I can't explain. I can never return to 'Pastimes' alone." I spoke shortly. The subject was difficult. So far, I had not thrashed it out even in thought. Mr. Thorold shot a quick, keen

glance. Instinctively, I knew where his thoughts were wandering. He was thinking of the bluff country Squire who had been so kind to his own little girls; remembering that he came from the same neighbourhood; that Evelyn Wastneys and he had been friends.

The stupid colour flamed in my cheeks. I made haste to turn the conversation from myself.

"It will make a difference to you, too. You will miss your friend!"

"Yes, but—I have borne the great loss, Miss Wastneys; I can spare him gladly, to his *joy*. When one has known the completeness of a real marriage, and then been left alone, it would be impossible to grudge—— My friends urge me to marry again; my girl herself said she wished it. If I had been less completely happy, I might have done it for the children's sake. As it is, I can never put another in her place. But I need a woman in my life. I feel that—but I want a mother, a sister, not a wife. Can't you evolve a *real* Miss Harding, who will look after me and my poor bairns?"

It was an hour later when the message came summoning us to return to the sitting-room. The two were standing to receive us—glorified beings, exalted above the earth. Oh, I can't write about it! We clung together. They spoke glowing words of love and thanks and appreciation; they looked past us into each other's eyes. It was wonderful, wonderful; but, oh, it made me feel desperately, desperately lonely!

CHAPTER XXVI

LOVE'S A NEW LIFE

LATE that night, after the two men had left, Charmion and I sat together over the bedroom fire, and talked and talked. Her lips were opened now, and she could talk without the old restraint. It seemed a relief to her to talk. I asked if "Edward" had ever discovered who was the sender of the fatal letter. "No," she said, "not actually. He is practically certain, but he did not trouble to bring it home. The mischief was done. Anyone who had a heart must have been sufficiently punished by the knowledge of the misery she had caused. He left her to that, but, oh! Evelyn, what a conception of *love*! to try to poison a man's home because he had chosen another woman as his wife! Not that I am much better! I have no right to speak."

Her lips quivered. She confessed to me that, on reading the two letters, she had been overcome with sorrow and remorse, but that Edward had refused to listen to her laments. They had both been wrong; each had an equal need of forgiveness, the suffering in either case had been intense—not another moment

must be wasted! Away with bitterness, away with remorse, the future lay ahead, it should not be wasted in vain regrets. Then, blushing and aglow, she told me her plans. "To-morrow—to-day," she raised her eyes to the clock, and glowed anew, "we are going by train to a sunny bay in Cornwall, to spend a second honeymoon. Edward's writing engagement could be fulfilled better in the country than in town. He had lingered in London for Thorold's sake, not his own. One month, two months to themselves, they must have, and then"—she straightened herself as in eager anticipation—"America! I must take him back, Evelyn! Back to his old home, and his old friends—to let them all see! Oh! all my life must be spent in making good the shame I have brought upon him, the misery and blame!"

I laid a restraining touch on her arm.

"Remember you are not to grieve! You have promised. That is forbidden ground!"

"Yes—yes, I know, but my heart, Evelyn! My heart will always remember." She turned to me tenderly. "Darling girl! we talked about you—it is through you that this happiness has come. We cannot be parted. When we are settled in our new home we want you to come over, to pay us a long, long visit. You could see your sister, too. You would enjoy that?"

I felt a momentary rising of bitterness, a momentary impulse to say caustically that it would indeed

be soothing for a lonely woman to visit two devoted married couples, but there was a wistful tone in her voice which showed that she understood. I made a big effort to laugh naturally, and made a vague promise. This was Charmion's night. I should be a poor thing if I damped her joy!

"And about 'Pastimes,'" she said slowly. "The agreement stands, of course. I pay half expenses for the next three years. Live in it, lend it, rent it as you think best. I should love best to think of you living there, until you come to us. You could find some friend——"

"Oh, yes! I have made enough friends at the 'Mansions' to keep me supplied with visitors for months to come. *If* I go back. But I'm not sure. This has come upon me with a rush, Charmion. I shall have to sit down, and think quietly. I shall see you again before you sail?"

"Of course." She looked at me with reproach. "You are the dearest person in the world to me, Evelyn—except *one*. Do you suppose I could leave England without seeing you again? We'll arrange a meeting somewhere, and have a week together. You and I, and Mr. Thorold, and Edward." She turned a sudden scrutinising glance upon me. "Evelyn, I have a haunting conviction that you are changed; that some man has come into your life. You aren't by any possibility going to marry Wenham Thorold?"

"Indeed I am not. He hasn't the faintest desire to marry me, or I to marry him. We are excellent friends, but nothing more. I honestly believe he regrets Miss Harding. You are growing too personal, my dear. I shall go to bed."

She laughed, kissed me, but refused to move.

"I'm not tired. I don't want to sleep. Sleep means forgetfulness," she said. "It will rest me more to remember!"

I left her leaning forward, with hands clasped round her knees, gazing into the fire.

Charmion left the next morning, and I prepared, with the strangest reluctance, to turn back into Miss Harding, and return to the basement flat. For the last week I had been living in an atmosphere of romance, which had put me out of tune with ordinary life. Bridget showed her usual understanding. "'Deed, I always *did* say a wedding was the most upsetting thing in life!" she declared. "A funeral's not in it for upsetting your nerves, and setting you on to grizzle, the same as a wedding. Not that Mrs. Fane's—Hallett, I suppose—was a wedding exactly, but it sort of churned you up more than if it was. To see her all a-smiling and a-flushing, and looking so young! Her as always held herself so cold. And now to have to go back to live underground, with you mumping about in a shawl!"

"Cheer up, Bridget dear," I said soothingly. "It won't be for long. I feel myself that I need a change. Perhaps we'll go to Ireland. The Aunts are grumbling because I don't go. Just a few weeks more, while I think things over and make my plans. Make the best of it, there's a good soul!"

She looked at me, more in sorrow than in anger.

"I'll make the best of it, *with* the best, when there's a call to do it," she said firmly; "but you'll only be young once, my dear. You may throw away things now as you'll pine to get back all the days of your life. When you're thinking things over just remember that!" She stumped from the room, leaving me to digest her words.

The next week passed heavily. I saw little of Mr. Thorold, and suspected that the revelation of Evelyn would work against further intimacy. It was impossible that he could feel the same freedom and ease; impossible that he should commandeer my help as he had done in days past. There was no blame attached to the position, it was natural and inevitable; but the loss of the easy, pleasant intercourse left a gap in my life.

Mrs. Manners had gone with her children to visit her mother; Mrs. Travers cut me in the hall. Poor Miss Harding was having a bad time! Nobody needed her; her absence had passed unnoticed; her return awoke no welcome. Bridget besought me to go out and amuse myself, but I obstinately refused

to go, and stayed glued in the flat. Not for worlds would I have acknowledged it to a living creature, but—I was afraid that while I was out some one might call. Ralph Maplestone had said that business would bring him to town. Now that the Merrivales were in Switzerland, and that anxiety was off his hands, he could come when he liked. If he did not come it must be because he did *not* like!

The reflection did not help to raise my spirits, nor to pass the long-houred days; but it did give me an insight into my own heart. For the first time I was honest with myself, and acknowledged that I *wanted* him to come! I faced the possibility that I might wait in vain, and felt suddenly faint and weak. It had come to this, that I *needed* his strength, that I felt it impossible to face life without him by my side. I determined, if he *did* come, to show signs of weakness in my resolution; possibly to go so far as to arrange a meeting with my niece.

He came one afternoon when I was darning stockings by the dining-room table, and the disobedient orphan showed him straight in on the domestic scene. I hurriedly hitched round my chair and drew the casement curtains, making an excuse of "too much sun," then folded the shawl round my shoulders, and sat at attention. He said he was pleased to see me. Was I quite well? The weather was very bright. Good news from Switzerland, wasn't it? General Underwood was suffering from

gout. What were Miss Wastneys' plans for the summer?"

"She—she doesn't know herself!" I sighed vaguely. "Circumstances have—er—altered. Her friend Mrs. Fane"—(I realised that Escott would have to hear some explanation of Charmion's departure, but was loth to set tongues wagging)—"has decided to return to America. She has spent most of her life there, and has many ties."

He looked supremely uninterested. Mrs. Fane might go to Kamtschatka for all he cared!

"And will Miss Wastneys keep on the house alone?"

"Nothing is yet decided; but I think—not!"

He looked unperturbed. Showed none of the agitation I had hoped to see.

"Does she intend to join Mrs. Fane in America?"

Now I felt hurt! Obviously, oh, quite obviously, he did not like me so much as he did! It was nothing to him where I lived—nothing to him where I went! A terrible feeling of loneliness overwhelmed me. Nobody cared! I pressed my lips together to prevent their trembling; behind my spectacles I blinked smarting eyes. A big brown hand stretched out and was laid over mine; a big soft voice asked tenderly:—

"Evelyn! How long is this tomfoolery to go on?"

We were standing facing one another across the

table. I had darted behind its shelter in that first moment of shock and dismay. His face was lit with a mischievous smile; his hands were thrust into his trouser pockets; his eyes surveyed me with a horrible, twinkling triumph.

"Oh! Oh! Oh! You know!"

"Of course I know!"

"You have known all the time? From the very beginning?"

"Not just at first! I'll give you credit for taking me in for a short time—a very short time! Then you gave yourself away."

"How? How?"

"When you do a thing at all, you ought to do it thoroughly. Your disguise was incomplete."

"Incomplete? But I had lessons. I paid to be taught."

"Then your instructor, whoever he may be, omitted one important item. The moment I noticed it, the whole thing became plain. I knew I was talking to Evelyn Wastneys, and not to her aunt."

I remembered the sudden flashes of complacency which had mystified me so completely. This was the explanation! I was devoured with curiosity.

"What was it? You must tell me!"

"Your hands!" He smiled, showing his strong, white teeth. "Your pretty hands, with the dimples, and the pink nails, and—the sapphire ring!"

"Ah!" I looked down at the big square stone in

its setting of diamonds, and felt inclined to stamp with rage at my own forgetfulness. It was my mother's engagement ring, and for years I had worn it every day. To my new friends, of course, it had no associations; but for this man who had noticed it on Evelyn's finger, who had gazed with a lover's admiration at Evelyn's hand, the clue was unmistakable! So far as Ralph Maplestone was concerned, all my care, all my pains, had been rendered useless by that one stupid little omission!

I stood dumb and discomfited, and the Chippendale mirror on the opposite wall reflected a round-shouldered figure, a spectacled, disfigured face. I felt a sudden, overwhelming impatience with my disguise.

"For pity's sake, Evelyn, run away and turn into yourself!" came the command from the big voice. (It is extraordinary how he follows my thoughts!) "I can't make love to you in those things."

"I don't want you to make love to me!" I said—and lied!

"But I do, you see, and it's my turn! I've waited long enough."

He crossed the room, opened the door, and stood with the knob in his hand, waiting for me to pass through. I stiffened my back and stood still. I told myself that to give in—*after that*—meant that I agreed—practically gave my consent. I would *not* do it! I would *not*! I would stand all day rather than move an inch. Nothing should induce me.

He rattled the knob, and stared steadily in my face. I turned and—*went!*

“Evelyn Wastneys, will you take this man to be your wedded husband?”

I had come back again—in my blue dress!—and he met me on the threshold, where I verily believe he had been standing waiting, all the time I changed. He took both my hands in his, and asked the question so deeply and seriously that it brought the tears to my eyes.

“I think I—will!” I said shakily. “But you must not be too sudden with me, please, because I was so certain that I never would. You must give me time to get used to the idea.”

“You can really love me? You can really manage to care?”

“I can! The difficulty lately has been—the other way! When you didn’t come I was afraid. I had a horrible conviction that you’d changed your mind.”

He laughed, and drew me closer, wrapping me close in his strong arms. I lay still, and felt as if all my burdens were rolling away, and a big strong barrier hedged me in and protected me from the buffets and responsibilities of life. It was a blissful feeling—full of joy, full of rest. Now it seemed worth while having been a lonely woman. No sheltered, home-living girl could possibly have rejoiced as I rejoiced.

"You are mine! I'll take care of you. No more rushing about, and living in disguise."

"I don't want to ramble. Never did! I want a home, and my own man. Do you remember when you said you would give me my own way—in reason?"

"And you objected that I would wish to come first? I do."

"Bless your lonely heart! So do I. I'm afraid I shall spoil you, Ralph!"

"Oh, do!" he cried, and there was a hunger in his voice that sank deep in my heart. He needed me! How good it was to know that, to realise that in all the teeming millions in the world no woman could be to him that I was!

Later on—after a blissful interlude—I began to ask questions:—

"What will your mother say? Will she be surprised?"

"She'll be delighted, for my sake, and her own! At the bottom of her heart she has always longed to be with her girl. And she's prepared. She recognised the signs."

"As Charmion did in me. Why? Do we show it in our faces?"

"Of course we do. Why not? Love's a new sense, a new life. If one has any expression at all it *must* show. I've gone about feeling as if I were labelled 'Evelyn Wastneys'. By express route,'

for a year past! Now I've got you! You're coming back to take care of me at the 'Hall'!"

I rather liked the idea of myself as mistress of that old house! With my head on his shoulder I devoted several moments to the consideration of how I should arrange the drawing-room. It was amazing that I could not conjure up one pang of regret for dear "Pastimes"!

"There's a lot to be done first," I told him. "Two homes to break up. I shall have to find new tenants."

"What about General Underwood for 'Pastimes'?" he asked.

I raised my head and looked at him. He was manfully trying to smile.

"Wretch!" I exclaimed. "So you've got your way after all!"